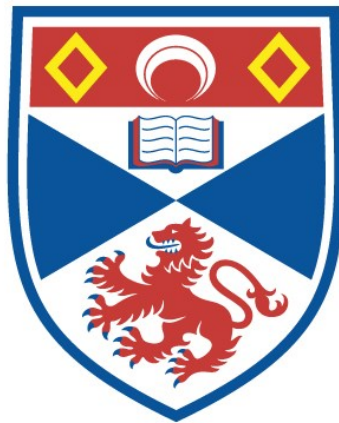


HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGY AS A METHODOLOGY IN  
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CASE STUDY: CONTEMPORARY SPIRITUALITY IN THE ROMAN  
CATHOLIC ARCHDIOCESE OF ST. ANDREWS AND EDINBURGH,  
SCOTLAND

Gordon T. Barclay

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD  
at the  
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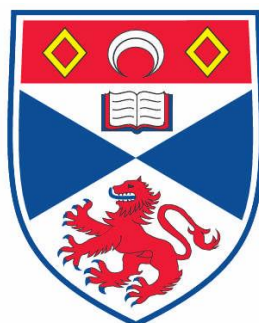
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**HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGY AS A METHODOLOGY  
IN THE STUDY OF SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE**  
**Case study: Contemporary spirituality in the Roman Catholic  
Archdiocese of St. Andrews and Edinburgh, Scotland.**

**GORDON TAYLOR BARCLAY**



**A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF DIVINITY  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
at the  
UNIVERSITY OF ST ANDREWS  
ST MARYS COLLEGE, ST ANDREWS**

**September 2013**



## **ABSTRACT**

This work considers the theoretical, epistemological and methodological criteria for a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to the study of spiritual experience founded within a qualitative paradigm. Spirituality is noted to be of increasing significance in society and as a developing discipline within the academy and spiritual experience is offered as an opening to greater understanding and appreciation of an individual's understandings of their spirituality. The methodology provides an interpretative approach towards an opportunity for resonance, identification and empathy between individual and reader through richly descriptive narratives offering insights into such experiences and developing themes and threads of particular interest prior to seeking universal and semi universal traits between or amongst narratives. Practical methods for applying the methodology are considered, including ethical and researcher reflexive issues.

The assessment of the methodology includes its application to a case study, located within contemporary Christianity in the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of St Andrews and Edinburgh, Scotland, which due to limitations of space focuses particularly on the notion of the Gift and assists in the determination of the efficacy and validity of hermeneutic phenomenology in the study of spiritual experience.



## DECLARATIONS

I, GORDON TAYLOR BARCLAY, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 80,000 words in length, has been written by me, that it is a record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

Signature of candidate:..... Date:.....

I was admitted as a research student in September 2005 and as a candidate for the degree of Ph.D. in September 2006; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St Andrews between 2005 and 2013.

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I hereby certify that the candidate has fulfilled the conditions of the Resolutions and Regulations appropriate for the degree of Ph.D. in the University of St Andrews and that the candidate is qualified to submit this thesis in the application for that degree.

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The case study could only have been undertaken with the consent of the Archbishop of St Andrews and Edinburgh, however Cardinal Keith O'Brien was particularly generous not only in allowing my research within his Archdiocese but to do so with no preconditions, no interference and no oversight: he gave me complete freedom to conduct my research to my timescales and for this also I am greatly indebted. I would also wish to thank within the Archdiocese the many who have assisted, particularly Mgr Philip Kerr and Fr. Gero McLoughlin S.J. who have both been incredibly generous with their time and counsel.

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## Introduction

It is well documented within the academic literature that there is a growing interest in spirituality within contemporary society, interest which is often both unrelated to traditional religions and occurs at a time of apparent decline in traditional religious affiliation. This interest raises important questions: what is significant about *spirituality* and what is it about *spirituality* that is attractive to people and is possibly, though not necessarily, distinct from traditional religions? This thesis concerns itself with these questions and asks if hermeneutic phenomenology can be utilised as a methodology by which spirituality may be explored, in order to illuminate possible reasons for these observations.

In considering a working definition for spirituality we will trace the origin of the word through Christianity, in particular St Paul's differentiation between the 'spirit' and the 'flesh', although more recently the term has extended beyond Christianity to refer more generally to the 'interior life' or a subjective, experiential form of living which offers purpose and meaning. Spirituality's influence extends beyond Christianity and is referred to in many traditions, religious and otherwise.

David Hay noted an increase in the reporting of spiritual or religious experience between 1987 and 2000; samples polled in 1987 indicated 48% of respondents reported some form of such experience,

compared to 76% in 2000 (Hay 2006, 11). Scottish high streets and shopping centres frequently include outlets selling various forms of spiritual merchandise; crystals, psychic readings, tarot, angels, clairvoyants and many other forms of practice such as Reiki which, together with a migration in many bookshops from 'Religion' to 'Spirituality' and 'Self-help', indicate a commodification of spirituality predicated on sufficient levels of interest to make such businesses viable. This commercial marketing further reflects something profound about spirituality and its attraction for ordinary people. Why is it that people are becoming increasingly interested in spirituality, when traditional religious expression appears to be in decline? How might we obtain a greater understanding of what spirituality offers from within this movement? One deeper reason may be that for many an understanding of spirituality stems from personal engagement. It is experienced rather than learned and thus has a strong, practical dimension which, coupled with its perceived flexibility, accessibility and perceived freedom from the jurisdiction of a specific tradition with its associated dogma and regulations, makes it personal, elastic and non-challenging. Spirituality is capable of being found with equal validity both within traditional religious practices and without, suggesting it can accommodate, yet does not require, formal religious structures. Within the academy spirituality is capable of being legitimately located within a Divinity School or other faith-based centre: Religious Studies; Nursing;

Management; Education; Social Work and other non faith-based departments. This may in part be due to its practical dimension: spirituality is 'done' rather than 'read'.

The apparent capacity for spirituality to have profound effects on people's lives, its widespread acceptance and practice as well as its increasing significance and profundity of influence makes it an important topic for study. In particular, because of ease of access, varieties of expression and use of spirituality by ordinary people, the study of spirituality from the perspective of experience is an important and useful starting point. Such a study may offer opportunity for greater appreciation of the motivations, needs and means of sustenance gained by people through spiritual practices. To pursue this, a methodology is required which will provide an insight into experiences, especially the meaning and understanding of practitioners. Hermeneutic phenomenology has been utilised within a number of disciplines for this purpose, specifically to study experience. However this methodology would need to be applicable to spirituality as a distinct discipline, with its particular characteristic of possible transcendence, whilst not being perceived as tainted by 'religious' associations or bias towards other academic disciplines. Cohen notes that hermeneutic phenomenology is about how people interpret their experiences. As such it is distinct from sociology or anthropology, which may enquire about the social and culture processes influencing such experiences, or

from approaches such as grounded theory, which study social processes or ethnography and may be interested in understanding cultures and traditions. Hermeneutic phenomenology is directed towards description and interpretation, rather than explanation.

Although I have placed a strong emphasis on the practical dimension of spirituality, it must be stressed that the study of spirituality is not restricted to or satisfied exclusively by the study of experience; many other approaches, including sociological, psychological, theological, cultural and religious studies are necessary in developing a clearer picture of what is an important phenomenon both for individuals and society. However providing a descriptive interpretation of spiritual experience is a significant and vital aspect of the study of this phenomenon, without which the beauty and power of spirituality may be lost in a desire to explain and dissect. What I set out to achieve in this work is an assessment of whether hermeneutic phenomenology is capable of providing a rigorous, insightful and valid approach to studying spirituality from an experiential perspective. In particular the methodology needs to be applicable to religious and non-religious spiritual experiences in order to be valid, because it is spiritual experience, rather than such experiences located within a particular construct for understanding, which is the object of our enquiry. Spirituality as a discipline is distinct from and not founded upon religious dogma.

The work begins with a review of spirituality, leading to a research question which locates the use of hermeneutic phenomenology as a methodology for the study of spirituality from the perspective of experience within the context of contemporary spirituality. After a review of hermeneutic phenomenology and its practical working, there is the case study which is located within Roman Catholicism. This is partly because of the practicalities involved in conducting a case study for this project, but also in order to ascertain if and how the methodology could be applied to a religious tradition, whilst simultaneously drawing out significant insights which were not exclusively rooted in theology. In Part Three consideration is given to the theoretical, epistemological and methodological elements which may be applied so as to underpin the use of hermeneutic phenomenology in the study of spiritual experience. Here reference is made to the case study, which will enable us to answer the research question. This approach follows a similar protocol proposed by Crotty. The use of a case study will aid a more informed and illuminated consideration of hermeneutic phenomenology from within the distinct discipline of spirituality, and demonstrate the usefulness and limitations of this approach. Particular note is made that, because the approach comes from within the discipline of spirituality, no specifically religious or other ideological basis can be utilised in support of either the methodology or the topic under study, except to the extent that it

provides assistance within the interpretative process. Though there may be an emphasis on Christianity in Chapter One, this is due in part to the volume of works within spirituality referring to this tradition, the origins of the term being located within this tradition and my own personal leaning thereto. However this does not restrict the methodology to this tradition. Likewise, due to the limitations of this work, the case study must itself be limited. A particular focus is applied in relation to the notion of "Gift". We conclude with a discussion on the merits and limitations of applying hermeneutic phenomenology to the study of spiritual experience from within the discipline of spirituality.

One of the critical aspects of a work of this nature will be the avoidance, so far as possible, of the researcher's voice and perspective in handling other persons' experiences, which may be achievable through reflexivity. The work is undertaken from within the Centre for the Study of Religion and Politics and the Practical Theology unit at the University of St Andrews, a locus which should not be interpreted as precluding or minimising the methodology's application in other areas. My own background is within the reformed Christian tradition, though I have had an active interest in spiritual practices, including the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola, for some time. The case study, being located within Roman Catholicism, provides some familiarity between this research and my own experiences. The fieldwork was undertaken with the consent of the then Archbishop of St

Andrews and Edinburgh, Cardinal Keith Patrick O'Brien, who resigned with effect from 25<sup>th</sup> February 2013, by which point the fieldwork had been completed.

The case study appears after the chapters reviewing spirituality and hermeneutic phenomenology. This allows theoretical considerations to be informed by reference to that study, and also provides an understanding of spirituality and the methodology prior to the case study, in order to aid an appreciation of what we are attempting to achieve. Again it is stressed that this methodology is being applied from the locus of the emerging discipline of Spirituality to spiritual experience and as such the theoretical considerations are not predicated on Christian or other religious or equivalent ideological premises and do not require a researcher to accept the views of any participant in a study, nor of any religious tradition or ideology. However, it does demand that those views are treated respectfully and as being true for that participant.





## **PART ONE**

### **An Introduction to Spirituality and Hermeneutic Phenomenology**



## **Chapter 1**

### **Spirituality: An Introduction**

The term '*spirituality*' has become increasingly utilised within churches, the academy and mainstream society over the last few decades (Schneider 2005a, 1), with the term "fast becoming a household word not only in churches....but in corporate America....and in the global marketplace of ideas and practices" (Dreyer and Burrows 2005, xi), a view which is supported by O'Murchu, who notes that it is of increasing importance within contemporary society (O'Murchu 1997, 8, 12-13). The decline in religiosity and simultaneous growth in interest in spirituality has been noted by Spencer (Spencer 2002, 7), whilst Hunt has reached similar conclusions regarding the importance of spirituality amongst non-church attendees (Hunt 2003, 159) and Woodhead and Heelas have reported an increasing importance of spirituality in society (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 1). Thompson notes that "Spirituality has over the last couple of decades become a focus of great interest" (Thompson 2008, v). Downey highlights the applicability of spirituality beyond Christianity (Downey 1997, 1) and King considers that, "the contemporary cross-disciplinary interest in spirituality is a phenomenon of global proportions" (King 2011, 18). Erricker and Erricker, who claim that, "spirituality is expanding into new and unfamiliar horizons," (Erricker & Erricker 2001, 1), together with the commentators above, represent a sample of similar views and illustrate

the extent, influence and importance of spirituality in society, thereby supporting the importance of undertaking research in this area.

Whilst Taylor acknowledges the ongoing significance of spirituality in society, though its focus may change with culture (Taylor 2007, 506-507), Bruce suggests that emphasis on individual autonomy, as proposed by Heelas and Woodhead (2005), would result in the cessation of any form of shared culture, which he proposes is a key sustenance for the endurance of spiritual matters (Bruce 2002, 105). However this itself mistakes spirituality for religious practice because spirituality focuses essentially on the individual, though community and ideological frameworks are important but not exclusive supports, as may be highlighted in spiritual experience, which is essentially individualistic. Smith suggests that it is secularisation that restricts “meaningful and authentic discussion” (Smith 2010, 212), with there often being a difference between what people believe in one context and say and do in another. In response Vining<sup>1</sup> makes a call for people to contemplate ‘openings’, which he describes as opportunities in experience capable of offering a vision of a reality beyond the reductionist world of material systems (Vining 2004, 205)<sup>2</sup>. We can

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<sup>1</sup> In *The Song Sparrow and the Child* (2004), Joseph Vining sought to tread a path between antiscience and totalistic science by appealing to an awareness of a spiritual dimension.

<sup>2</sup> A discussion of the religious/secular divide and the interplay between same is beyond the scope of this work, though it is helpful to recognise the difference between religion, in the sense of organised practices, and spirituality, whether individually or in community. Furthermore, whilst Bruce discusses quantitative trends, he does not address the qualitative issues of spirituality.

therefore appreciate that spirituality is not only an engrossing topic but one of profound, significant, and increasing importance and influence in society, rendering it an important area for academic research as well as being, “probably one of the most fascinating subjects anyone can study” (McGrath 1998b, x).

Spirituality appears to have been an increasingly important force in society since the 1960s, albeit in different guises (Dreyer and Burrows 2005, xi; Carrette & King 2005, 1; Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 1). Today it has become the concern of everyone (Tacey 2004, 2-3), possibly due in part to the complexity of contemporary life and the “disparate elements of their existence,” which have turned people towards spirituality as it is regarded as more flexible and tolerant than traditional religion (Lesniak 2005, 8) whilst still providing a context for meaning and purpose in life. Supporting this idea is the proposition that the interest in spirituality is predicated on an unprecedented rate of change socially, politically, economically and technologically (Dreyer and Burrows 2005, 7). From this we may deduce that, driven by rapid and continuous changes in society and individuals’ need to make sense of their lives and the contemporary world, spirituality has become a focus through which meaning can be sought and obtained. Indeed it is possible that the ‘spirituality revolution’ is a spontaneous social movement as a consequence of:

our secular society realising that it has been running on empty and has to restore itself at a deep, primal source, a source which is beyond humanity and yet paradoxically at the very core of our experience.

(Tacey 2004, 1)

Spencer (2002) and Heelas and Woodhead (2005) have recorded a transition from religion to spirituality, identified in a movement from organised religion to a personalised exploration of the inner life, involving a change in focus from searching for the life-to-come to seeking meaning for one's current existence. Additionally, as we have noted, spirituality has become a significant factor in society. By becoming an influential dimension in the meaning-deriving processes of individuals' spirituality, it has become a significant and influencing factor in contemporary society. The website of the University of St Andrews states, "The spiritual and physical welfare of our students is an institutional priority,"<sup>3</sup> and the NHS in Scotland is moving from chaplaincy to spiritual health, promoting resilience, meaning and self worth<sup>4</sup>. These serve as examples that spirituality is not only fascinating as a topic, worthy of study, but is also highly relevant in, to and for individuals and contemporary society and thus an

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<sup>3</sup> University of St Andrews. 2010. "Student welfare and safety." <http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/parents/AboutStAndrews/> on 30<sup>th</sup> September 2010

<sup>4</sup> Further information about spiritual care within the NHS can be found in Spiritual Care Matters: An Introductory Resource for all NHS Scotland Staff, which can be found at <http://www.nes.scot.nhs.uk/media/3723/spiritualcaremattersfinal.pdf> (as at 14<sup>th</sup> August 2013).

important area for academic research. Spirituality may be studied using a number of methodologies, however hermeneutic phenomenology has been used previously to study experience and has a sensitivity towards experience through being interpretative rather than explanatory, which is of interest to this project. However, prior to reviewing hermeneutic phenomenology, in order to consider what spirituality is and is not, and to develop a working definition for this project, having particular regard to the position that, although this work is located within Divinity, and the case study specifically located within the Roman Catholic Christian tradition, reference to Christianity must not restrict the application of the methodology to only this tradition because our interest is in spirituality as a distinct discipline, not from a specific ideological, dogmatic, religious, theological or Christian perspective. Schneiders, and those who have followed, have clearly articulated what the academic discipline of spirituality is not: it is not theology, it is not anthropology and it is not religious studies (Berling 2006: 35). It seeks to understand spiritual experience from this novel perspective, rather than through another academic lens such as anthropology, literature, nursing, education, social work, psychology, sociology, etc. We are studying spirituality as spirituality, not 'applied spirituality' as it may be found in these other disciplines, where it is integrated with other complex factors, founded on differing theoretical premises and focussed on those disciplines' directed outcomes. Spirituality, as a discipline,



involves the study of lived spiritual experience by a hermeneutic approach (Lescher and Liebert 2006: 4-5) and that is a basis from which this work progresses.

After addressing the issue of a working definition, we will survey the study of spirituality within the contemporary setting and within the academy, and review recent studies in this area. This will enable us to consider experience as a key attribute of spirituality and thus the appropriateness of considering hermeneutic phenomenology as a methodological approach, as well as the loci to which it could be applied. Such loci include both the contemporary setting as we are interested in studying spirituality as it is currently understood, practised and experienced, and the academic setting, both because it is a piece of academic work endeavouring to add to academic knowledge and because of the validity of the academic discipline of spirituality. We now turn to defining spirituality for this project.

### **Defining Spirituality**

Defining spirituality has proven to be a challenging objective, with many different offerings illustrating the breadth of the topic. For example, Stringfellow uses a spectrum to assist defining spirituality which includes stoic attitudes, interior journeys and political resistance to “squatting on top of a pillar” (Stringfellow 1984, 19), whilst McGinn identifies over thirty-five definitions of the term spirituality (McGinn,

1993, 4). Possible rationales for such variations in the definition of the term may become more apparent through considering what is important in spirituality and what is not necessarily essential, for example Perrin's observation that "spirituality is not necessarily associated with belief in a God or some other supernatural being" (Perrin 2007, 3).

Davies defines spirituality in terms of "alluding to a self-aware acknowledgement of emotional experiences enhancing the meaning of life" (Davies 2011, 280), bringing forward the characteristics of self-awareness and meaning-giving, whilst Lescher and Liebert, in acknowledging the work of Schneiders, delineate the object of the discipline of Christian spirituality as "the spiritual life as experience" (2006: 4). Tacey however reminds us that spirituality transcends the religious–secular divide (Tacey 2004, 1-2), defining 'sacred' more widely than in terms of traditional concepts of deity (Tacey 2004, 19-20). Elkins defines spirituality without reference to religious concepts, in terms of a way of experiencing, recognising a transcendent dimension with identifiable values including to self, others and the Ultimate (1988:10), which is about a way of being, or authenticity and meaning. This idea that spirituality is involved in a meaning-deriving process is proposed by many, including Saunders, who suggests that meaninglessness is the essence of spiritual pain (1988: 29). From a non-religious, medical perspective, the Royal College of Psychiatrists

describes spirituality as something all persons are capable of experiencing, which assists in finding hope, meaning and purpose and encourages better relationships, importantly recognising a distinction between religion and spirituality.<sup>5</sup> We can thus understand spirituality in terms of offering meaning and authenticity, promoting a sense of purpose and possibly a transcendent dimension. It is perhaps reasonable to expect experience to be a central element in spirituality (Holder 2005, 2; Maas and O'Donnell, 1990, 11). Rankin describes spirituality more ethereally as, "*an awareness of another level of existence*" (Rankin 2008, 1).

Within the Christian tradition spirituality has been conceptualised as "that process by which God seeks continually to work upon our lives and experience, and of our world, drawing forth meaning, identity, order and purpose" (Mursell 2001, 9) and as the "...theory and practise of Christian living" (Sheldrake 1991, 33). Schneiders' definition, which proposes that "...lived experience can be defined as a conscious involvement in the project of life integration through self-transcendence towards the ultimate value one perceives" (Schneider 2005, 1) is interesting as, although her work is located within the Christian tradition, she acknowledges by her definition the wider scope of the discipline.

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<sup>5</sup> [www.rcpsych.ac.uk/expertadvice/treatments/spirituality.aspx](http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/expertadvice/treatments/spirituality.aspx) accessed on 3rd March 2013.

Perrin highlights some important constituents of spirituality, such as notions of motivation and capacity, the reasons why, as well as the abilities to act or be receptive, which enable the external expression of spirituality. He also draws attention to the concept of authenticity, which he describes in terms of "...the integration of all aspects of life in a unified whole" (Perrin 2007, 17), which can be understood in terms of completeness. Tacey suggests that spirituality is very different to fundamentalism because spirituality seeks a transformative relationship involving acceptance of mystery and uncertainty, whereas fundamentalism seeks certainty and absolutism, though both are a response to a complex and changing world (Tacey 2004, 11).

A clear definition of spirituality remains problematic. However there are important identifiable attributes, which include concepts of the creation as well as sustenance of meaning, purpose and relationship within a construct that is not necessarily dependent on religion. Further, that spirituality incorporates an ongoing, transformative process within an individual towards, though not necessarily attaining, an actualisation of the person manifested through authenticity and wholeness. For example, within Christianity, this may relate to a person becoming more as Christ has called that person to be.

A convened seminar of theologians, philosophers and other specialists are reported to have failed to reach agreement on a definition of spirituality yet agreed that examples of spiritual

experiences were clearly identifiable (Hay 2007, 8). Although spirituality has been understood as a dimension of religious experience (Estanek 2006, 270) following studies such as by Heelas and Woodhead, spiritual experience within contemporary society extends beyond the religious but retains a dependency on experience because of the deeply personal nature of spiritual experience; it is one thing to read, talk or learn of something, but direct experience is much more profound. In this work, therefore, we understand spirituality in terms of personal experience.

The understanding of spirituality within this work is that of an everyday type of experience, which ought to be differentiated from those rare experiences of transcendence by which one is drawn out of oneself and unified with a transcendent Other, which may be described as mystical. Karl Rahner, speaking specifically in terms of Roman Catholicism, argues that mystical experience, as such, ought not be regarded as a rare encounter by the contemplative mystic, but rather may be found, “present as innermost sustaining ground... in the simple act itself of Christian living in faith, hope and love” (Rahner 1983, 70). However Rahner also acknowledges that there are other understandings of the definition of mysticism, which he endeavours to exclude through applying Christian theology (Rahner 1983, 69). McGinn avoids defining mysticism directly in favour of noting it as (a) an element of religion, (b) a way of life and (c) an attempt to express

the direct consciousness of the presence of God (McGinn 1991, xv). This latter point supports our definition in terms of unity with a transcendent Other and, importantly, as being distinguished from the everyday experience we define as spiritual. The term mysticism has been widely and often inappropriately used, leading to confusion as to its meaning (Butler 1966, 3). Perrin highlights the central feature of mysticism as being the experience of intimacy with a divine reality (Perrin 2007, 443). These types of experiences are not ordinary, but involve a blurring of the self with a sacred entity, often within the context of the surrender of the self (Perrin 2005, 443), which differentiates the everyday experience of spirituality from mystical experience.

It is also helpful to note the difference between spirituality and religion because within the academic literature and in society this distinction is increasingly commonplace. The decline in religion and rise in spirituality suggests this distinction is fundamental. Howkins notes that there is no generally agreed definition of religion, repeating Cicero's definition in terms of, "giving proper honour, respect and reverence" (Howkins 1988, 575), whilst Whaling identifies a difficulty in defining religion depending upon perspective (Whaling 1993, 547-553). Generations view the term differently because it is connected with understandings of humanity which change generationally (Kunin 2003, vii). Hanson suggests that the academic study of religion focuses on

aspects of the religious life such as institutions, ritual and doctrines (Hanson 1993: 18), however distinguishing between the terms remains difficult, even in fields such as healthcare (Nolan 2011: 51), despite acknowledgement of a distinction (Dyson, Cobb and Forman 1997: 1184). Fitzgerald contends that 'religion' as an analytical term should be effectively abandoned, because what is actually meant by it is the involvement of culture in the construction of identity and the study of cultures and societies (Fitzgerald 2000, xi). Flood defines religions as, "value-laden narratives and behaviours that bind people to their objectives, to each other, and to non-empirical claims and beings" (Flood 1999, 47). Howkins proposes a definition involving practical results, such as worship, ritual, a specific worldview, destiny and the way daily life ought to be lived (Howkins 1988, 575), a definition supported by Heelas and Woodhead's characterisation of religion as the, "conforming of individuality to a higher, common, authoritative good" (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 14).

There are important distinctions to be drawn from these definitions which aid us in understanding how the core values of spirituality differ from religion. In the former experience of the sacred is a fundamental characteristic, encouraging a lifestyle and worldview involving adherence to specific patterns of living and the seeking of a closer relationship with the sacred on a daily basis because of the benefit to the individual, whereas religion incorporates authority,

theoretical principals, external conformity and outward, often public, practices. Heelas and Woodhead discuss what they believe is a “subjective turn” in contemporary culture (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 2) classifying religion as “life-as”, (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 3) by which is meant living in accordance with external expectations and a turning towards a “Subjective life,” by which one is guided by one’s own inner self. They state:

The subjective turn is thus a turn away from life (lived as dutiful wife, father...strong leader, self-made man, etc) to ‘subjective-life (life lived in deep connection with the unique experiences of my self-in-relation).

(Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 3).

Spirituality refers to living an authentic way of life, founded on commitment and limitations to the participant’s mode of living, so as to be directed towards a deepening of the relationship between the individual and the sacred which manifests in greater authenticity, sense of meaning and purpose, founded on everyday experiences. Accordingly, experience is central to spirituality, although how that experience is understood will be heavily influenced by the context in which it is experienced.



## **Experience and Spirituality**

Karen Smith's portrayal of spirituality is as a subject not to be taught but a journey to be travelled with her students (Smith 2007, xi). She identifies an important characteristic, which Rankin describes as experiencing something with spiritual or religious significance pointing beyond the everyday (Rankin 2008, 5), differentiating spiritual from religious experience where the latter conforms to tenets of that religion (Rankin 2008, 11).

Alister Hardy established the Religious Experience Research Unit at Oxford, seeking a biological basis for spiritual experience. This is an interesting but different approach to, and study of, that which we are considering. Hardy was seeking a biological basis for spiritual experience, whereas hermeneutic phenomenology seeks meaning and understanding from experiences rather than investigating an individual's capacity to have such experiences. So whilst Hay and Hardy importantly highlight the centrality of experience in spirituality, they do so through a scientific approach, whereas here we seek something complementary, namely to understand something of what spirituality means and how it is understood by individuals.

Two major figures in the field of religious experience are William James and Rudolph Otto. James, during the Clifford Lectures of 1901/02, described "extreme examples as yielding profounder information" (James 1912, 486) since examining religious experience

from more 'extreme' examples may render them more readily apparent and more easily subjected to examination. Hay corroborates this, noting that James commenced his position from conversion experience (Hay 2005, 422). Whilst James also proposed that religious experience was an innate human capacity (James 1912, 512), Hay usefully notes a contentious division between religious experience and spiritual awareness, concluding that spiritual awareness is an innate human quality, whilst religious experience is the expression or understanding of the experience within the context of a particular religious tradition (Hay 2005, 424). By extension we may consider spiritual experience as the meaning attached to spiritual awareness by its location in a particular context, whether religious or otherwise.

Otto considered that religion comprised something beyond ethical considerations of the good or perfectly moral. He denoted this unique element the *numinous* being, the "real innermost core," comprising 'the holy' minus its moral factor minus the rationale factor (Otto 1958, 6-7); a *sui generis* category of its own. Throughout his, '*The Idea of the Holy*' is the notion of feelings, e.g. "the nature of the numinous can only be suggested by means of the special way in which it is reflected in the mind in terms of feelings" (Otto 1958, 12). Otto specifically excludes those who have not had a religious experience (Otto 1958, 8), which the current literature suggests is too restrictive

(Kunin 2003, 65), but usefully both James and Otto acknowledge the centrality of experience within the field of spiritual-religious experience.

For religion to be personal it must have an experiential dimension, though such experiences are with an “invisible world” (Smart 1981, 22). Smart proposes that to understand the spiritual experiences of others requires an understanding of the ways in which internal and external meanings utilised by individuals in meaning-deriving processes of experience operate (Smart 1981, 11). Consideration needs to be given to both experiences and the context in which these experiences occur, including the factors which are utilised by an individual in attaching meaning to experiences. De Unamuno has suggested, “we live in memory and by memory, and our spiritual life is at bottom the effort of our memory to persist, to transform itself into hope, the effort of our past to transform itself into our future” (De Unamuno 2005, 9). This view importantly signposts the crucial role of memory in the meaning-deriving process, again emphasising the need to contextualise experiential descriptions.

Eliade uses the term *Hierophany* to designate the “manifestation of the sacred” (Eliade 1957, 11), meaning humankind’s experience of the sacred, and suggests that through spiritual experience it is possible to see sacrality or sacredness in potentially any aspect of nature (Eliade 1957, 12).

In this section we have found a movement in nomenclature from religious experience to spirituality, which is indicative of a widening understanding of humankind's interaction with the transcendent, for which the centrality of experience and the importance of contextualisation in order to create meaning are inherent features.

### **Contemporary Spirituality**

Contemporary spirituality is a phrase frequently employed because in its widest usage it refers to spirituality within the contemporary setting. Erricker and Erricker suggest that spirituality is fundamental to the human condition because belonging, which every individual seeks, “evokes a sense of the spiritual” (Erricker and Erricker 2001, xv). Hay, following Hardy, suggests that spirituality is an inherent dimension of the human condition and has a physiological basis (Hay 2006, 142) whilst Lesniak proposes that culture influences spirituality, with the current interest predicated on an unprecedented rate of change socially, politically, economically and technologically (Dreyer and Burrows 2005, 7), all of which influence perceptions of reality (Lesniak 2005, 8). These views collectively portray contemporary spirituality as an inherent characteristic of humankind, though its manifestation may be influenced by cultural forces, thereby implying that experiences are influenced by such forces and therefore that spiritual experiences need to be understood within their context.

Dreyer and Burrows trace the increase in popular spirituality to the 1960s as "...a time of change and upheaval when a significant proportion of the population began to experiment with new forms of consciousness and communication that took the inner life seriously" (Dreyer and Burrows 2005, xi). This view is echoed by Luckmann (Luckmann 1967, 113-114) which, taken with Lesniak, offers a description of the complexity of pluralistic contemporary society as a, "multifaceted yet fragmented world" (Lesniak 2005, 8), permeating daily life. As a consequence, in an effort to draw meaning, people turn to spirituality rather than religion, because they perceive it as more tolerant, flexible and inclusive (Lesniak 2005, 8). This "soul hunger" is global, according to Dreyer and Burrows (Dreyer and Burrows 2005, xi); its exploitation has been recorded by Carrette and King who have stated, "spirituality is big business" (Carrette and King 2005, 1). We can see how in a fragmented, individualised society, incapable of fulfilling basic human needs which can be satisfied through spirituality, that spiritual practices could be utilised, via many diverse expressions, to satisfy these basic needs.

The rise of spirituality can be traced to the radical movements of the 1960s, which placed a greater emphasis on self-progression and supported spirituality located within experience, whilst the rate of social, technological, cultural and material changes provided greater challenges for individuals seeking meaning for their lives, increasing

the demand for a spirituality that is ultimately refreshing. Carrette and King alert us to the appropriation of spirituality by one participant, causing huge social change: business. Thus it is prudent to consider some areas in which spirituality is relevant outwith 'traditional' religious spheres, thereby providing an insight into the breadth and depth of spirituality's influence on contemporary society, which we now do by considering some examples<sup>6</sup>.

The workplace and business is generally regarded as far removed from spirituality. The Foundation for Workplace Spirituality<sup>7</sup> state they are "dedicated to raising spiritual awareness and consciousness in the workplace"<sup>8</sup>. This corresponds with Hick's observation that many people seek greater integration of their religious or spiritual beliefs with their working lives (Hick 2003, 25) and that businesses also promote spirituality, for example Tyson foods having workplace chaplains and Ford and Xerox offering spiritual retreats (Lambert 2009: 1). Spirituality is also promoted as a valuable interest within academic courses for business managers (Lambert 2009, 1), perhaps because in such workplaces workers report feeling happier and more motivated, perform better and there is less staff turnover, perhaps because of a greater sense of community and belonging

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<sup>6</sup> We are not trying to discuss the range of 'applied spiritualities' but simply to note its impact in some loci and to provide an illustration of spirituality's scope of influence, though here we will restrict this consideration to three important areas.

<sup>7</sup> [www.workplacespirituality.org.uk](http://www.workplacespirituality.org.uk) accessed on 4<sup>th</sup> October 2010.

<sup>8</sup> [www.workplacespirituality.org.uk/welcome](http://www.workplacespirituality.org.uk/welcome) accessed on 4th October 2010.

(Garcia-Zamar 2003, 362). Both Hick and Carrette & King have described the profitability of spirituality as business (Hick 2003, 27; Carrette & King 2005, 1) with Carrette and King suggesting it is a means of increasing profitability and exploiting new markets (Carrette and King 2005: 1), whilst Hick suggests that a variety of religious traditions have been involved in the movement of spirituality into the workplace through the ageing of the 'baby boomer' generation into midlife, as this generation has had little involvement with organised religion yet seeks spiritual refreshment and expression (Hick 2003, 27-28). It is possible that spirituality functions by creating an alternative form of communal life (Hick 2003, 29) whereby the process in which a person is viewed as a whole, incorporating their identity and background, brings positive economic effects (Hick 2003, 40-41) and indeed spiritual leadership involves creating vision and value congruence throughout strategic, team and individual levels to foster increased productivity and organisational commitment (Fry 2003, 693). Driscoll and Wiebe usefully note that longitudinal studies are needed to differentiate between authentic spirituality and a technical spirituality, to distinguish between the claimed values of an organisation and the actual ethics employed (Driscoll and Wiebe 2007, 343).

Spirituality would appear to be prominent in the public sector, with suggestions that those drawn to public service are inclined to accord more with public sector ethics such as benevolence, altruism

and justice and that through public service they “meet their own needs through the service of others” (Houston and Cartwright 2007, 99).

The role of spirituality in healthcare, especially nursing, is increasingly pronounced, with a greater recognition of its value within healthcare, but the transition from theory to practice is difficult (Finch 2006, 34). Whilst guidelines about spiritual care are contained within professional ethics and there is greater awareness of spiritual needs amongst nurses, there is uncertainty about how to manifest a practical, workable spirituality as often practitioners feel unprepared (Ross 2006, 852-853). Helpfully there is a growing body of literature regarding the spiritual wellbeing of patients (Ross 2006, 860). Baldacchino notes that “the essence of spiritual care is being rather than doing, which was an integral part of early nursing but is now inhibited due to a combination of secularisation” (Baldacchino 2008, 270) and that nurses’ reduced competence to deal with such issues arise due to a lack of faith (Baldacchino 2008, 272 & 280). Spiritual care is built in a trusting relationship, in which meaning and purpose can be sought during illness (Baldacchino 2008, 272). However Hense and Maas, who classify ‘*Societal Spirituality*’ as spirituality in social sectors such as care giving, note a removal of a spiritual context as the care giving sector separates from religious institutions (Hense and Maas 2011, 76-79). Although there may remain difficulties about defining spirituality, nevertheless the term remains helpful to patients and healthcare



workers, because meaning is emergent from particular circumstances and context provides a responsiveness to the needs of each situation (Swinton and Pattison 2010: 228-230).

By 1999 little had been written about spirituality within education (Love and Talbot 1999, 361). However spirituality could be seen as part of an holistic development of the individual, thereby a core element of the education experience, because the issues relevant to spirituality in education were being discussed in other disciplines (Love and Talbot 1999, 362). This view led to Love and Talbot pressing for greater and clearer emphasis on spirituality within student development (Love and Talbot 1999, 368). Importantly, as interest about spirituality grew within education from the late 1990s, it also became increasingly dissociated from religion (Estanek 1990, 270-271). Although openness within a teaching environment is regarded as critical for “educators with integrity,” (Bennet 2003, 4-5) within an atmosphere of competition, self-sufficiency and adversarial clashing, there is little space for the openness, integration and transformation that can lead to autonomy with integrity, which is central for teaching within a collegial setting.

The purpose of this section has been to demonstrate the role of spirituality in diverse disciplines where each considers spirituality to be a significant and enhancing dimension to their subject, to position the increasing importance of spirituality within contemporary settings and, importantly, to highlight the separation of spirituality and religion. Thus,

whilst there may not be a universally accepted definition of the term spirituality, its function is apparent and reinforces our notion of spirituality as being practical more than theoretical and incorporating characteristics such as meaning-giving, belonging and community. We can clearly see how spirituality differs from theology and religion by virtue of its application in many non-theological and non-religious settings and therefore why spirituality needs to be considered outwith these disciplines.

We now turn from how spirituality is applied in various subjects and contemporary society to its academic study as a discipline.

### **Spirituality within the Academy**

Sheldrake notes, “Spirituality is now an important academic field” (Sheldrake 2007, xi) and Perrin’s stated aim was “to introduce the reader to the exciting and newly emerging discipline of Christian spirituality” (Perrin 2007, 2). These observations raise the questions of why spirituality needs to be a new discipline and what its defining characteristics are.

In 1997 McGuire observed, “we do not yet have the language or conceptual apparatus for refining our understanding of spirituality” (McGuire 1997, 8). However by 2005 Dreyer and Burrows proclaimed the “rebirth of spirituality as an academic discipline” (Dreyer and Burrows 2005, xi) within their book *Minding the Spirit: The Study of*

*Christian Spirituality* (2005), which brought together a number of leading academics who noted the importance and distinction of spirituality as an academic discipline. Heelas and Woodhead discern, "...in recent years the emergence of something called 'spirituality'" (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 1), and Schneiders identifies that the "...distinguishing formality of spirituality is its focus on 'experience'", which is interdisciplinary because the object of study is "multi-faceted" (Schneiders 2005b, 6-7). McGinn also notes that, despite the ambiguity in its understanding, the term 'spirituality' and its popularity can make a considerable contribution to religion in the future, which makes it, and its varied application and expression an important and relevant discipline for investigation. Although spirituality as an area within Christian theology, especially Roman Catholic theology, has existed for centuries this new spirituality, extending beyond reformed denominations within Christianity to religious and non-religious groupings, has emerged comparatively recently. The academic study of this movement suggests a coalescence of opinion around the early 21st century of spirituality as a new academic discipline, which has developed as a discipline for a number of reasons. It extends beyond the Christianity within which it was historically located and finds expression and application in ways not previously envisaged, including business, healthcare, interfaith chaplaincy, education, social work and others, in addition to traditional forms of religious expression where it is

expressed in novel ways. Because spirituality is experientially founded and explores the “unification of life by reference to something beyond the individual person” (Schneiders 1986: 226), it is therefore not from Theology, Religious Studies, Anthropology or Literature and is not founded on the same or equivalent assumptions. Rather it studies actual individuals, their experiences, contexts and life events in priority over principles or theories (Schneiders 1986: 268) which by nature will be interpretative rather than explanatory and thus require a hermeneutical methodological approach. No academic subject founded on a religious tradition can encompass a subject of which a significant part is non-religious, but neither can secular-based studies such as religious studies explore religious behaviours and dogma from a secular position or a non-religious tradition, because religious dimensions are important and relevant within this discipline. Approaches by these other disciplines provide insight in important aspects of spirituality but spiritual experience needs to be treated with particular care. It is these theoretical positions which spirituality as a distinct discipline is capable of investigating, as it carries the capacity to be applied to traditions, whether religious or not, without needing to be burdened by associated dogma.

Principe proposed three levels of spirituality: (1) the real or existential level; (2) the formulation of a teaching about that lived reality (e.g. Ignatian spirituality) and (3) the study by scholars of (1) and (2)

(Principe 1983, 135-136), as well as a need for historical and cultural contextualisation in understanding a particular text or tradition (Principe 2005, 42 – 48), about which Unamuno has helpfully said:

We live in memory and by memory, and our spiritual life is at bottom the effort of our memory to persist, to transform itself into hope, the effort of our past to transform itself into our future.

(De Unamuno 2005, 9).

To be a distinct discipline, spirituality requires unique characteristics, as noted by Schneiders:

1. It is a first level subject because it is the study of lived experience, whereas theology, for example, is a second level subject because it attempts to reflect on those experiences (Schneiders 1986: 253).
2. It has as its object the spiritual life as experience, that is an attempt to understand the nature and transforming effect of spiritual experience (Schneiders 1994: 9).
3. It endeavours to understand the transformation towards “self-transcending life integration” (Schneiders 1998: 3) which in Schneiders field was Christianity, though this approach may be applied generally to spiritual practices.

4. Methodologically Schneiders argues that a hermeneutical approach is especially helpful (Schneiders 1986: 274).
5. The ultimate purpose of the discipline is to add knowledge about spiritual experience to the overall body of knowledge, assist in the development of the researcher's spiritual life and in the development of the spiritual life of others (Schneiders 1989: 695), whereby the objectives of the discipline are simultaneously theoretical and practical (Schneiders 1986: 273).

We thus find that within the Academy the study of spirituality is sufficiently formed and unique as to be a distinct discipline and although experience is a key element Principe reminds us of the need for locating studies within their context and Schneiders proposes a hermeneutical approach.

### **Recent Studies in Spirituality**

There are many studies located within a Christian context which are of interest because they form an area within spirituality from which to investigate experience and other aspects of spirituality. As noted, spirituality can be studied from the perspectives of a number of disciplines, the results of which can be illuminating for this distinct approach.

Spencer notes, whilst looking at faith in Scotland in 2005, that “spiritual encounters,” were more highly reported than in the Finney study of 1992, possibly reflecting a re-emergence and vibrancy in spiritual culture (Spencer 2005, 6-7) with a common theme being the notion of ‘journey’, though not necessarily expressed in that form (Spencer 2005, 9). Within Christianity in the United Kingdom Finney’s 1992 study is significant because it was a large-scale, interdenominational project in England, interviewing approximately five hundred individuals of differing denominational backgrounds (Finney 1992, 1) who had made a relatively recent public profession of faith (Finney 1992, 5) and sought to identify the means by which persons came to faith (Finney 1992, 36-50). It identified significant factors, such as the onset of faith being gradual (Finney 1992, 26-31), intensely real (Finney 1992, 26) and the occurrence of a “crystallisation” experience (Finney 1992, 30), which included an acceptance of a supportive role for the church (Finney 1992, 48-49). Interpersonal relationships were the most significant factor (Finney 1992, 36-47) highlighting the centrality of relationships and, by extension, experience within faith and spiritual development. This study was limited in that it was concerned with how individuals came to faith rather than the development and understanding of spiritual lives, however it does provide an insight into spiritual development by noting key aspects associated with coming to faith which can itself be an integral aspect of spiritual development.

Research in England by Hay and Hunt into '*Understanding the Spiritual Life of People Who Don't Go to Church*' suggested that whilst many were initially '*timid*' in discussing spirituality and there was confusion over the meaning of the term spirituality, nevertheless many felt they were on a "*journey*," and formed a notion of God albeit not specifically associated with the Christian God (Hay and Hunt 2000, 24-25). Spiritual development as a journey is a commonly-used metaphor which may be viewed as a biblical theme associated with pilgrimage and "travelling towards the kingdom of God" (Mrozinski and O'Donnell 1990, 100). Hay and Hunt refer to Hardy's contention of religious experience as a biological phenomenon with a biological determinant for a spiritual dimension within humans, whether latent or expressed, indicating there is a spiritual dimension in every person (Hay and Hunt 2000, 6), though they note the largest group as being, "uneasy about saying anything positive about their spiritual experience beyond the conviction that there is 'something there'" (Hay and Hunt 2000, 26). Lesniak's suggestion that spirituality is embedded within the culture of its time and location (Lesniak 2005, 7) may offer a possible explanation for Hay and Hunt's findings and indicate a limited and inaccurate appropriation of the UK's Christian culture by individuals in a post-Christian society to derive meaning for their experiences and existence, and supports Hardy's notion that such appropriation is an inherent characteristic of the human condition. Considerable further attention



has been given to biological bases of spiritual experience, but a review of this is beyond this work.<sup>9</sup>

Spencer notes, “declining religiosity is not matched by declining spirituality,” (Spencer 2003: 7) and in his study of agnostic perspectives of Christianity identified that respondents “expressed a sense of the numinous,” but lacked the “common Christian lexicon” which, coupled with antipathy towards traditional forms of Christian religion, caused them reluctance to employ its terminology (Spencer 2003, 50, 52). This research highlights a distinction between a sense of the numinous and institutional expressions of Christianity, and, significantly, that, “many respondents were inoculated against Christianity by their ‘little knowledge’” (Spencer 2003, 57). Importantly we recall that this study sought the views of those not part of the Christian community, which helps us to consider descriptions of spiritual experiences outwith a Christian religious tradition and illustrates the tangles and confused interplay between spirituality and perspectives of religious traditions by those who do not practice them.

Davie and others have commented on secularisation within society, reporting a decrease in religiosity but an increase in spirituality (Davie, Heelas and Woodhead 2003, 2). Importantly there appears a significant increase in interest in spirituality, possibly because it is

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<sup>9</sup> Works such as Beauregard & O’Leary (2007) investigate this dimension of spiritual experience.

perceived as “a resource pool to dip into...rather than a river that carries one in a particular direction” (Percy 2003, 96-97), suggesting that ‘attractive’ forms of spirituality in contemporary society may require less commitment and be more open to the selection of only appealing aspects. The general antagonism towards traditional modes of Christianity (Hunt 2003, 159) appears to correlate with an increased readiness by individuals seeking to blend religious traditions (Pearson 2003, 177-178). Together these reports suggest a significant shift in individuals’ perspectives of ‘religion’, resulting in less commitment, increased emphasis on emotion or feelings, greater selectivity of aspects of traditions to adopt and mixing aspects from different traditions and religions.

Richmond’s research within the Diocese of Coventry asked people who, whilst possibly having had a church connection previously, were at the time of the research not regular church attendees what “Big Questions” they had (Richmond 2005, 17). The research identified that many of these questions related to spirituality, such as notions of destiny, purpose, God and “the Spiritual Realm” (Richmond 2005, 17), which reiterated other research, including research by Mori for the BBC in 2003<sup>10</sup>. Richmond states, “....people in the UK today are decidedly ‘spiritual’,” (Richmond 2005, 81). A key conclusion was the dissociation

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/polls/2003/bbc-heavenandearth.shtml> accessed on 22nd September 2007.

of peoples' concerns and their understanding of the Christian response, suggesting Christianity was irrelevant, inaccessible or unattractive and failed to meet their needs within contemporary society (Richmond 2005, 20), again demonstrating the distinction between religion and spirituality.

Carrette and King have suggested that many aspects of spirituality have been assimilated into capitalist and neoliberalist ideologies (Carrette and King 2005, 44), founded on the interiorisation and individualization of religion and a focus on feelings (Carrette and King 2005, 38-39), with the subsequent interweaving of such individualism with economics, appearing under guises such as self-improvement (Carrette and King 2005, 44-45). The consequences may be that aspects of spirituality, especially techniques, have become detached from traditional religion and applied to very different circumstances.

Heelas and Woodhead's research, *'The Spiritual Revolution'*, explored the growth of spirituality, attempting to ascertain its significance and nature (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 1) by differentiating between religion and spirituality. Religion was categorised as *life-as* with a transcendent source of authority (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 6), found in traditional religious practices and exemplified: "...life-as roles are privileged over subjective life uniqueness" (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 14) whereas, in contrast,

spirituality was categorised as 'subjective-life' which places an emphasis on interiority as the source of authority' (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 6) and exemplified by "the focus...on the unique participant" (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 28). The study, however, offers limited, passing notice to traditional, or *life-as*, spiritualities (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 24). Heelas and Woodhead suggest there is a dual process of both secularisation and sacralisation, whereby *life-as* forms are undergoing secularisation and decline, whilst *subjective-life* forms are becoming sacralised (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 10). Within this transformative process '*The Subjective Turn*' refers to a cultural transformation in which life is no longer lived in accordance with external values such as duties and obligations, but rather by subjective experiences which become the source of meaning and authority (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 4-5). This 'subjectivization thesis' proposes that spirituality deals with the holistic 'healing' of the self by internal mechanisms, leading towards wholeness of the individual (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 26-27) and an acknowledgement that the spiritual dimension of life is the most important: "For the spirit is that in which all things come together, and in which each life reconnects with its deepest dimension." (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 26). Importantly, Heelas and Woodhead suggest their thesis reflects this idea:

With ever-increasing numbers of people having come to value what subjective-life has to offer, the tendency is for forms of associational activity that locate the sacred within to be doing well. For when the sacred, or spirituality, is experienced as lying at the heart of who you are, as coming from you, it can hardly constrain who you are. (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 125-126)

Whilst they acknowledge that *life-as* formations could also have subjective elements they are regarded as being "authorized", whereby spiritual practices seek conformity with a transcendental entity that provides the primary source of authority (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 14). The same researchers further suggest that a function of preaching is to discipline subjectivities by "selectively nurturing some sentiments and dispositions whilst rendering others invisible" (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 17). Some congregational formations (more commonly evangelical) are acknowledged to appeal for a more individual "subjective enhancement" whilst within the context of a higher authority, but individuals are discouraged from pursuing their own experientially based spiritual path in favour of forms of roles and expressions more regulated by the institutional structure (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 19). Heelas and Woodhead's research suggests that spirituality addresses not only individuals' needs, in terms of meaning and purpose, but also imbues a capacity to identify the fundamental

elements of who an individual really is and what their defining essence is, offering confidence in the pursuit of answers to these fundamental questions.

Many contemporary researchers of spirituality report a reflection of their own hopes, values and concerns (Lynch 2007, 7) and so cognizance of the researcher's position is necessary in a reflective approach. This is especially important as it is suggested that, in addition to claiming a religious or spiritual dimension, contemporary forms of spirituality share a core affiliation with liberal democracy, green/left wing politics, liberal or radical theological positions, or are sympathetic to feminist critiques of religious traditions (Lynch 2007, 98). The movement from traditional expressions of religion to individualized spiritual searching focused on experience in such a way that 'religious' impulses persisted, notwithstanding dissatisfaction with, or rejection of, Christian beliefs leading to a sacredness of life, with spirituality becoming detached from a pursuit of God and attached instead to a particular 'wholesome' quality of life (Lynch 2007, 105). This may be due in part to western society having become an "...over-ripe sensate culture" (Sorokin 1985, 622), exhibiting features such as loss of shared public values, increased exploitation within a capitalist construct, rising mediocrity and declining creativity, associated with increased anxiety and diminishing freedom (Sorokin 1985, 699). The cultural changes of 1960s America, such as increased mobility and

decreasing family and community bonds (Wuthnow 1998, 75), tertiary education (Wuthnow 1998, 65) and increased sexual activity possible through contraception (Wuthnow 1998, 67) is considered to have led to a change from a *spirituality of dwelling*, characterised by an uncritical sense of security gained from traditional religious establishments to a *spirituality of seeking*, characterised by a freedom of thought and self-expression (Lynch 2007, 112-113; Wuthnow 1998, 100). Whilst acknowledging the social changes, Roof attributes them to factors such as immigration, shifts in values and beliefs, a changing intellectual culture encouraging greater personal knowledge, the increasing role of the media, marketing and the erosion of local communities (Roof 1999, 8), which ideas largely concur with Wuthnow, both regarding social changes and context as significant factors in the exploration of alternative forms of spirituality.

The secularization of some societies is linked with the decline of institutional Christianity and growth of social forms of religion founded on autonomy and self-expression (Luckmann 1967, 109), leading to a marketplace in which individuals select resources and practices which they find most suitable for them at relevant times for developing their lives (Luckmann 1967, 98). This leads not only to a decline in institutional religion but also to a spiritual forum of fluid and transitory groups providing workshops, publications and resources on self-help, personal development and meaning-creation which is often non-

enduring (Lynch 2007, 107) but commercially aware (Carrette and King 2005, x). An explanation for such change is the expansion of choice throughout all aspects of life, leading to "...smooth continuity between consumer choices in different areas of life" (Berger 1979, 17) where consumer focussed approaches to culture extend to religion, compelling people into choosing beliefs and lifestyles that are meaningful and useful to them to fulfil their needs and interests at a particular time (Lynch 2007, 108), encouraging the process of subjectivization (Berger 1979, 21) which, coupled with increasing choice, leads to a weakening in the ability to sustain any religious beliefs (Berger 1967, 141). This notwithstanding Berger latterly noted the world was "...as furiously religious as it ever was" (Berger 1999, 2), though increasingly expressed through such *progressive milieu* as may be permitted by the secularisation of society, which heightens the dichotomy of individually perceived spiritual needs and traditional religious expression. Whilst agreeing with this notion of subjectivization, Heelas and Woodhead conclude that it is subjectivization that leads to cultural change rather than cultural change leading to subjectivization (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 111-112). Whilst *progressive milieu* may be a form of culture, or occulture as defined by Partridge (Partridge 2004, 67), coupled with an "Easternisation of the West", with an emphasis on perceptions of harmony and unity rather than the distinction between human and divine (Campbell 1999, 35-48), this



contemporary approach to spirituality as a negotiation that verifies for the individual the existence of a transcendental Other operates through the exploration of new rather than familiar experiences with often complex meanings being ascribed to spirituality (Wuthnow 1998, 4). Simmel however questions whether spiritual growth through the correlation of impulses could be substantial (Simmel 1997, 23), persistent and viable (Simmel 1976, 259).

Byrne, whilst acknowledging the value of New Age Movements, also calls upon Christian spiritualities to critique the perspective that spiritual development is an extension and consequence of healthy psychological development and absorption into a cosmic oneness (Byrne 1993, 575), whilst Heelas writes sympathetically about a variety of movements which hold in common “the wisdom of the experiential” (Heelas 1996, 9) and are largely self-focussed (Heelas 1996, 4). Heelas states that such expressions of spirituality offer a cultivation of ethical and universal significance through encouraging expressiveness and non-materialism focussing on the self, from where balance with humanity and life can be obtained but which are disrupted or destroyed by systems that dictate truth claims from beyond the individual (Heelas 2008, 231). Heelas also introduces a new term, *Birthright spirituality*, which he defines in terms of the sacralisation of human rights (justice, freedom, equality, dignity, liberty, etc) and the obligations and rights associated therewith (Heelas 2008, 224-230). Contemporary

understandings of spirituality focus largely on alternatives to traditional religions and especially Christianity, which is generally observed as being in decline and associated with externally regulated practices. What is readily agreed is that spirituality is a significant and growing force within western society. One of the most commonly noted aspects of spirituality is experience and many attempt to define or approach spirituality from an experiential point, for example Schneiders notes, “spirituality is concerned with the study of the spiritual life as experience” (Schneiders 2005b, 52), however experience is a difficult area to explore as it demands that priority is given to the individual; the priority is to accept as valid the experience itself, rather than employing theories and principles to explain experiences, having regard to prior knowledge and customs in reaching a conclusion about an experience. The difference, critically, is in giving validity and credence to the individual’s experience.

### **The Research Question**

We began this chapter considering the place of spirituality within society and noted that, certainly within the last few decades, it has become increasingly important and relevant but is distinct from religion. This separation has facilitated the application of spirituality to a variety of disciplines as diverse as business, healthcare and education. Whilst there is no consensus on the definition of the term, one of the agreed

central features of spirituality is experience. Thus, within an area of developing significance and the emergence of a new academic discipline, it is helpful to gain an understanding of how such an important aspect of the discipline may be studied.

In acknowledging the complexity of each individual and their understanding of the world, our ability to engage in understanding the spiritual experiences for each person is restricted to the extent to which the individual can describe the experience and whether we can identify the context from which we are able to offer an interpretation of spiritual experiences for that person and identify important constituents. This is dependent on the research approach being able to deal with two aspects: (1) the knowledge or beliefs held by an individual through which meaning and understanding is attained and (2) his experiences, which are the conscious awareness of something 'other', being understood within the context of that prior knowledge. In this study we endeavour to assess whether hermeneutic phenomenology as a methodology is capable of facilitating access, though accepted as being incomplete, to the knowledge and the spiritual experiences of an individual, subject to issues of validity, trustworthiness and limitations in terms of language and communication.

There are a number of disciplines that offer approaches to aspects of spirituality, however many of these approaches are often predicated upon theoretical principals such as notions or frameworks

for 'objective' truth, scientific replicability or holding the data up for testing and verification, whereas we seek to draw meaning from deeply individual and unique issues surrounding spiritual experiences, descriptions of which can be inherently subjective. Our research question is to ask if hermeneutic phenomenology can offer new insights into spiritual experience from an interpretative rather than explanatory approach, purely as such, rather than as an 'applied' enquiry, the function of which being to satisfy some specific objective. For example, in nursing the primary concern is the care of the patient and spirituality is considered in that context, not exclusively as spirituality.



## **Chapter 2**

### **Hermeneutic Phenomenology as an Approach to the Study of Spiritual Experience**

#### **Introduction**

In the previous chapter we noted the importance and growing influence of spirituality and that a significant aspect of spirituality involves understanding and meaning within the context of an individual's experience. We explored the nature of spirituality as an emergent discipline and its distinctness from other disciplines, considering recent studies that demonstrate the unique features of this new discipline, particularly its extension beyond traditional religious practices. The subjective nature of experience and its central role in the study of spirituality identified a hermeneutic approach as being a potentially useful one. In this chapter we will consider hermeneutic phenomenology as an approach which has been successfully applied in other disciplines, which will assist our assessment of its use in spirituality and especially spiritual experience. We begin with an overview of hermeneutic phenomenology, which will of necessity include a comparison between phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology and the purpose of the latter. This will enable a better

understanding of the case study which follows immediately hereafter, allowing a more detailed consideration of this approach to be undertaken having regard to the case study. The case study is necessarily limited and incomplete as its purpose is to illuminate the consideration of the application of hermeneutic phenomenology to the study of spiritual experience in its broadest terms, and not be to a study in itself nor to limit this approach to only Christian spiritual experience.

Hermeneutic phenomenology is not a creation of this work but rather an existing approach which is being applied to the study of an extra-ordinary form of experience within a developing discipline. Cohen notes it deals with the study of lived experiences and not reflected or vicarious experiences (Cohen 2000, 1) and is used to answer questions about meanings, especially attempts to understand experiences from the position of those having the experiences (Cohen 2000, 3). Spiritual experience is differentiated from other forms of experience, such as eating, working, pain or relationships where issues of actual existence and measurement are less controversial and complex, because they can be observed and in some way measured. As such spiritual experience is extra-ordinary because it pertains specifically to a transformative process within each individual by self-transcendence, and the integration of all aspects of their life towards an authentically based unified whole, focussed on the ultimate value they attribute to their life. As such it differs from ordinary experiences which

do not in themselves direct such a transformative process, though some experiences may contribute to, or be, a constituent of spiritual experience. Firstly we will consider theoretical aspects of hermeneutic phenomenology and the methodological approach, before exploring examples of the application of hermeneutic phenomenology in other fields of study.

### **Phenomenology and Hermeneutic Phenomenology**

Phenomenology as it is generally understood today was founded by Edmund Husserl (Moran 2005, vii) on the premise that individuals do not respond exclusively to external stimuli but rather understand such stimuli from within the context of their own experiences (Husserl 1970a, 249). As such phenomenology is the study of lived experience or the life-world (Van Manen 1997, 9) or how experience is understood prior to being conceptualised, contextualised and reflected upon; it is not the study of the external stimulus itself. By adopting this approach an attempt is made to describe and gain a better understanding of experiences including those that are commonplace, apparently insignificant or taken for granted, thereby uncovering new or rediscovering forgotten meanings.

Phenomenology is located within continental philosophy which is committed to the “questioning of foundations” (Kearney 1994, 2), whilst neither accepting metaphysical foundationalism nor positivist reductive



“meaning to fact” approaches, adhering less to pure reason and acknowledging that Being is not reducible to verification, evidence and coherence (Kearney 1994, 3). Blum proposes an approach to phenomenology in the study of religion that is interpretative (2012: 1026), by which some issues and criticisms of the phenomenology of religion can be satisfactorily addressed. How this may operate in relation to an hermeneutic phenomenological approach to the study of spirituality, and especially spiritual experience, is discussed in Chapter Seven.

Husserl considered that consciousness of an object was both an essential element of experience and an intentional act (Husserl 1970b, 556), which means the mind is directed to the phenomenon, making the objective of phenomenology “the attempt at value-free descriptions of religion” (Smart 1969, 21). He postulated that there was an intentional experience and an object, which, if experienced, then by being experienced creates a relationship, the “intentional relation” (Mohanty 2006, 71). Flood deduces that Husserl’s position was that “truth lies in consciousness and the indubitable experience of the cogito” (Flood 1999, 93).

In contrast Heidegger focussed on *Dasein*, the human way of Being, which he defined in terms of the situated meaning of a person in the world (Heidegger 1962, 27-28), intentionality being in the performance of intentional acts and thus not an object (Heidegger

1962, 73), facticity being the state or quality of *Dasein* in an experience which underscores “it is as a fact” (Heidegger 1962, 82). Taminiaux describes intentionality as a means of identifying relatedness and being, a central element of facticity and thus existence (Taminiaux 1994, 40) where facticity is defined as a “specific way of intending” and “a specific correlate which has its way of appearing qua intended” (1994, 40). As such facticity is a fundamental characteristic of human existence, as “for all times the self brings its ‘there’, its perspective or its situation, along with it, in such a way that the ‘there’ determines in advance how the self apprehends and comprehends what is there for it” (Macann 1993, 87). That is to say that an object is located within an already existing context, rather than the object taking priority and being understood within an object-led context. To achieve this mechanism for understanding Heidegger considered that facticity needed to be in relation with temporality, to create a position where being occurs in a place and at a time where an unconcealment occurs (Taminiaux 1994, 43), an unconcealment being truth (Taminiaux 1994, 42), a subjective truth.

The difference between the Husserl’s approach and that of Heidegger is that Husserl’s attention was directed at identifying essences and the objectivity of subjective experience, whereas Heidegger was directed at finding meaning from the individual’s situatedness in the experience. Hermeneutic phenomenology,

seeks to highlight and explore aspects, including seemingly trivial aspects, within experience to create meaning and understanding (Lavery 2003, 23) including, unlike phenomenology, locating the researcher's self-reflection within an interpretative process, possibly explicitly stating how their position relates to the issue being researched (Lavery 2003, 28).

Husserl's approach begins with self-reflection by the researcher, to identify bias and assumptions, which are then bracketed out to enable engagement with the experience. By contrast Heidegger held that the researcher's bias was embedded within and essential to the interpretative process. Husserl sought the ideal or essential structure of an experience whereas Heidegger sought meaning from within a historically informed construct. How these differing perspectives apply in relation to spiritual experience will be discussed later and illuminated by the case study. Van Manen discusses phenomenology both in terms of seeking essences and being interpretative (Van Manen 1997, 75 & 77) and Cohen differentiates amongst Duquesne phenomenology (based on Husserlian principles) as descriptive, Heideggerian phenomenology as interpretative and hermeneutic phenomenology as combining features of descriptive and interpretative phenomenology (Cohen 2000, 9).

Having considered basic principles of this approach, we now turn to the workings of hermeneutic phenomenology.

## **Essential Features of Phenomenology: Epoché, Reduction and Empathy**

The phenomenological approach is fundamentally different from a notion of “close reading” as it is founded on specific theoretical and methodological approaches. In the previous section we considered theoretical issues within phenomenology and in this section we will consider the practical workings comprising bracketing or epoché, reduction and empathy.

Husserl originally trained in mathematics (Moran 2005, 4) and his idea of bracketing can be seen as an application of a mathematical principle into an alternative philosophical system. The term epoché, derived from the Greek, is used to mean a suspension of judgement, the process of putting to one side, or bracketing, naturalistic assumptions about the world that deeply influence our perception and understanding of it (Moran 2000, 147), thereby allowing the researcher to consider the experience purely as a phenomenon without the need to consider issues such as its validity. By suspending judgements about beliefs in the natural world, it is possible to consider phenomena as they appear. The process towards meaning-deriving is the reductive part of the process.

Reduction for Husserl refers to the moving back from the phenomenon to the essence or essential (or eidetic from the Greek

*eidōs*, meaning essential) structures of the experience (Moran 2000, 146). It involves taking all the features of conscious appearance as they appear and as genuine (Moran 2000, 152), by which Husserl sought to reduce the conscious experience to its essential elements, or the essence of such experiences (Keller 1999, 117-120). Heidegger has some concern with Husserl's position because of his interest in *Dasein* and how one's own being informs intentionality (Crowell 2005, 62-63). Within hermeneutic phenomenology reduction specifically refers to the process of meaning-creation through the application of the hermeneutic circle. Van Manen describes this process as (1) questioning the meaning of an experience, (2) overcoming one's own private feelings, biases, inclinations and expectations that would prevent one from being able to come to terms with an experience as lived through, (3) stripping away theories, scientific conceptions and thematizations that prevent seeing the phenomenon in a non-abstract way and (4) see through the particularity of the lived experience to the essence of the phenomenon (1997, 185). Cohen, Kahn and Steeves describe the reduction with regard to the hermeneutic circle, involving a process of moving from field text to narrative text which can stand alone. It involves multiple reading of the field texts, called immersion in the data, the identification of the essential characteristics from each interview, assessing relevant parts of the transcripts of the field data and drawing together the parts that relate to the same topic. Thereafter

significant phrases are identified, tentative themes named and exemplars highlighted, exemplars being parts of the transcript in the participant's own language that capture the essential meanings of themes. The process of writing and rewriting then follows, which includes the application of the hermeneutic circle through developing an understanding of participants' meanings, which are teased from the exemplars and themes but then applied to the whole transcript, back and forth, in a manner wholly empathic to the participant, such that the developing meanings reflect both the exemplars and the wider text. This produces a coherent, descriptive narrative, illuminating the essential elements of the experience (Cohen, Kahn and Steeves 2000, 72-83).

This procedure has been used in various disciplines as a means of finding meaning in experiences, using a descriptive and interpretative process rather than with any explanatory purpose. The outcome offers new and significant findings into experiences, whilst being open to the interpretation of others and not explaining or reducing experiences to theories, though a subsequent application of the outcomes of the hermeneutic phenomenological enquiry could be applied to such theories. We shall now consider the application of hermeneutic phenomenology from within other disciplines.

## **Hermeneutic Phenomenology and its Application in Various Academic Disciplines**

In this section we examine how hermeneutic phenomenology has been applied in disciplines other than spirituality and consider the objects and outcomes of projects where it has been applied. Hermeneutic phenomenology is an established methodology for the study of experience in a variety of disciplines and is concerned with lived experience, focussing particularly on illuminating seemingly trivial aspects within experiences that are taken for granted, but through which a sense of understanding and meaning can be attained (Lavery 2003, 24).

Within cancer care considerable work has been done in attempting to better understand the lived experiences of patients, carers and staff. An example is Probst, who used hermeneutic phenomenology to explore the experiences of people dealing with a malignant, fungating wound, including staff, care-givers and patients. The authors noted the approach offered a means of exploring the experiences “in great detail”, with its objective being to describe the phenomenon of caring within the context of this condition (Probst 2012, 3066). Data was gathered via open-ended interviews and the methodology applied as described by Van Manan; (1) a verbatim transcription of the interview was made; (2) immersion in the text was

undertaken by re-reading the transcript; (3) thematic phenomena were identified and abstracted and (4) phenomena were categorised, so as to make sense of the essential meanings of each phenomenon (Probst 2012, 3066-3067). A conclusion of this research was that the quality of life for the carers deteriorated due to the tasks required of them (Probst 2012, 3069). Thus the application of hermeneutic phenomenology within a healthcare setting yielded significant results.

Duffy sought to explore lesbian women's experiences of using health care services in Ireland. The chosen methodology was hermeneutic phenomenology, based on the philosophy of Heidegger and Sartre (Duffy 2011, 337), because it offered an approach towards authenticity. Duffy appeals to Jones and Creswell, stating that phenomenology seeks to understand a phenomenon as presented, and it is individuals who confer meaning on experiences of phenomena (Duffy 2011, 337), and so she considers that a phenomenological approach is concerned with how individuals describe, interpret and understand phenomena. This is important because such understanding informs how such individuals create their reality (Duffy 2011, 337) which may be different to others having had different experiences of the same object. Using Heidegger's concept of *Dasein* as a theoretical framework for placing the participants in a position of active meaning-creation (Heidegger 1962, 67) as well as Sartre's ideas regarding the self, Duffy refers to Moran (Moran 2000, 357) in respect of meaning-



giving as an internal process to justify this methodology, articulating the understandings and meanings of the participants (Duffy 2011, 337). In conducting the subsequent interpretation Duffy refers to Van Manen and reiterates his position that “hermeneutic phenomenology does not yield absolute truths....at best gains an occasional glimpse of the meaning of human experience” (Van Manen 2002, 7). Duffy reaffirms her view that phenomenological research is “always only one interpretation” (Duffy 2011, 339). Her research illustrates the use of hermeneutic phenomenology within a Social Policy discipline, which together with the previous examples reaffirms the methodology as being rooted largely in Heideggerian philosophy, addressing the interpretation of experience and demonstrating that it is capable of yielding significant outcomes which are subjective and relate to everyday experiences.

Guignon states that hermeneutic phenomenology’s purpose is to describe human beings in “average everydayness, prior to high-level theorizing and reflection” (Guignon 2012, 97), describing the phenomenological dimension as involving (1) bracketing out natural attitude, (2) describing how things come to appear as phenomena and (3) identifying essential structures of phenomena, their means of appearance and how human experience permits such appearance (Guignon 2012, 98). He subsequently describes hermeneutics as beginning with the recognition that human phenomena are inherently

meaning-laden and that all humans can access others experiences because all persons are meaning-endowed beings, and therefore understanding phenomena involves understanding the meaning attached to the experience (Guignon 2012, 98). Guignon acknowledges that hermeneutic phenomenology is not the approach most frequently adopted in psychology because he asserts that this discipline is more strongly influenced by naturalism, demanding objective facts and testable generalisations. He claims that this avenue seeks to “abstract out meanings and values from the phenomenon as it appears” (Guignon 2012, 99), to create a scientific formulation which, however, is counter to the approach of hermeneutic phenomenology because (1) the phenomenological aspect brackets the uncritical presuppositions, (2) hermeneutics asserts human experience as always meaning-laden, influenced by its context and (3) hermeneutic phenomenology questions the ability to create generalizations about human experience, accepting it is possible to identify characteristics that form a type of scaffolding whilst recognising the capacity for changing self-interpretations (Guignon 2012, 99). Guignon seeks the support of Taylor’s concept of a person as a being with capacity to adopt “life plans” and Heidegger’s idea that humans are different from other animals in that our motivations are based on both impulse and reflection (Guignon 2012, 99-100) and thus not predetermined but rather worked out in the process of living (Guignon 2012, 100). In

Guignon's works we see the application of hermeneutic phenomenology within psychology as a means of understanding a notion of "person" and also how the approach may appear as counter to the more traditional approaches seeking generalisations.

Worsley used hermeneutic phenomenology to gain insights within an educational setting (Worsley 2013, 55-71), in order to allow "the child's voice to be heard from within their various contexts" (Worsley 2013, 56). Each child participated in an interview lasting approximately one hour (2013, 56) which explored their developing perspectives of biblical creation. Hermeneutic phenomenology was used to obtain meaningful descriptions of lived experiences and Fowler's concept of faith development was used to create a foundation on which a study could be conducted into how the children within the study were interpreting the concept of creation within faith. This study does not report methodological workings, however it does provide significant insights into religious nurturing (2013, 57, 68-70). This approach illustrates an example within education of hermeneutic phenomenology, providing descriptions of experiences and highlighting themes and threads which were subsequently applied within a specific theoretical framework to give context to the lived experiences of the participants. This example also illustrates a productive relationship between hermeneutic phenomenology and an explanatory process.

In this section we have considered the application of hermeneutic phenomenology within a number of disciplines to demonstrate its validity as an established methodology, albeit counter to many reductive generalising approaches. In seeking a greater understanding of experience within spirituality we wish to pursue this approach rather than a participant observation or ethnography method as may be employed in an anthropological study. Whilst this methodology has been applied in other disciplines, its suitability to spiritual experience within the discipline of spirituality has yet to be considered; this is the scope of this work. Spirituality differs from other disciplines because of the emphasis on spiritual experience, the nature of the relationship with a sacred or transcendent Other which is largely beyond traditional reductive approaches and the spectrum of disciplines with which it may interact. Schneiders has considered that a phenomenological approach may not be suitable to the study of spirituality because of its disinterested approach (Schneiders1986, 268), so an assessment of its suitability is both innovative and significant.

This section has demonstrated the existing use, acceptance and applicability of this methodology in relation to the study of experience, but does not consider the theoretical elements underpinning its application in relation to spiritual experience, which is important in relation to Schneiders' criticism thereof. In order to determine the

suitability of hermeneutic phenomenology for the study of spiritual experience we will need to consider a framework within which it is capable of being understood, which is undertaken in Part Three, having regard to the case study in Part Two.

### **Summary**

Phenomenology is the study of lived experience or the life-world of a person as lived by them, rather than as the world being separate from them, and enquires into meanings of human experience as lived. Hermeneutic phenomenology is located within this tradition, particularly within continental philosophy, adhering less to pure reason, and acknowledging that Being may be greater than that which is reducible to facts, verification, evidence and coherence. Whilst we will consider phenomenology, and hermeneutic phenomenology, in more detail in subsequent chapters we have noted here an overview of the principles and approaches of hermeneutic phenomenology in order to appreciate its approach and application in the case study which follows. We have also noted the application of this approach for the study of experience in a number of disciplines, which will aid us later in our consideration of its applicability to the study of spiritual experience in particular.

We now turn to the case study, which is the application of hermeneutic phenomenology to a study investigating spirituality within the contemporary setting of the Archdiocese of St Andrews and

Edinburgh. After the case study we will give consideration to this approach and its theoretical underpinning with reference to the case study. The purpose of the case study is therefore not primarily as a study into the subject but as a vehicle to enable a better understanding of the methodology and assist in assessing its usefulness within the study of spirituality.



## **PART TWO**

### **A Case Study:**

**Contemporary Christian Spirituality in the Roman Catholic  
Archdiocese of St Andrews and Edinburgh, Scotland.**





# **Chapter 3**

## **Christian Spirituality, Roman Catholicism and the Archdiocese of St Andrews and Edinburgh**

### **Introduction**

In Chapter One we considered spirituality in its contemporary manifestation and noted its extension as an academic discipline beyond boundaries. In this chapter we review spirituality as a dimension of Roman Catholicism within the Christian tradition, whereafter we shall consider the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of St Andrews and Edinburgh, all only in so far as it gives context to the case study and before proceeding to the narratives and the hermeneutic phenomenological enquiry. This chapter is divided into two sections, the first addressing issues of Christian spirituality pertinent to the case study and the latter attending to Roman Catholicism and the Archdiocese, so far as pertinent and possible within this limited case study, the purpose of which is to demonstrate and illustrate the analysis of hermeneutic phenomenology as a methodology in the study of spiritual experience.

## **SECTION I**

### **Christian Spirituality**

Spirituality, very generally understood within this tradition, incorporates notions of experience, dynamic relationship and response to God and has been an integral part of the Christian tradition since its inception,<sup>11</sup> the very term *spirituality* being derived from Christianity, from the word *pneuma* in the Pauline epistles (Sheldrake 2007, 3). The practice of spirituality has varied significantly over time. To gain a better understanding for the purposes of this case study we shall consider briefly certain elements; monastic and non-monastic traditions<sup>12</sup>, Celtic spirituality, examples of spiritual writings, contemporary expressions of spirituality, academic theories that may be pertinent to the interplay between spirituality and Roman Catholicism and Reciprocity and Gift Exchange. We begin by considering monasticism.

### **Monasticism and Non-monastic Traditions**

#### **Monasticism**

The 'call' to separation in order to find greater freedom to pray has been a characteristic of Christianity from early times, but the motivation to so do was enhanced by the increasing alignment of the Christian tradition to secular society, early desert monasticism having

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<sup>11</sup> This generalised definition accords with the working definition of the term discussed in Chapter One.

<sup>12</sup> For a number of centuries monasticism was a rich source of spiritual insights and practices and has been influential in spiritual practices beyond the monastery.

been practised in solitude, in loose groupings or in small communities, often in the company of a wise guide. Inspired by the narratives of the Acts of the Apostles (Pennington 1993, 666), at a very deep level what was sought was “blessed simplicity” (Hale 2005, 445). The move towards urbanisation within monasticism occurred through the households of bishops which modified the monastic lifestyle, becoming more articulate and closer to society (Ward 1983, 268). In particular St Basil of Caesarea, who formulated rules for monastic living, and Athanasius’ who wrote the *Life of Antony* were highly influential in the transition from desert to urban areas (Pennington 1993, 666).

Monasticism requires a commitment to follow strict models for living. Although the earlier, now anonymous, precepts for community rule known as the Rule of the Master had been the most dominant the Rule of Benedict quickly became the principal pattern for monastic life in Western Christianity north of the Mediterranean and was highly influential (Hamman 1988, 512-513) due to of its balance and lucidity (Hale 2005, 446) outwith Celtic monasticism (Ward 1983, 268). John Cassian<sup>13</sup>, referred to in the Rule of Benedict (Ward 1983, 77-78), founded two monasteries in Marseilles, one for men and, interestingly, one for women, both of which adopted the principles of the Celtic saints

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<sup>13</sup> (360–435) Cassian spent time in the Egyptian desert with monks where he learned their practices.

St. Cuthbert and St. Hilda, bridging the transition from Celtic Christianity to the Gregorian usages (Hale 2005, 445).

Ward describes monastic spirituality as a lifestyle in which life and spirituality cannot be separated (Ward 1983, 268), founded on a renunciation which does not reject normal human fulfilment through marriage, possessions and service through work but rather seeks alternative interpretations of fulfilment through the idea of 'loss of self' in order to grow in Christ (Ward 1983, 258). Pennington suggests that the monastic life is about the fulfilment of Luke 10:27, an exclusive focus on God providing opportunities to love others in God. Humility and obedience are seen as a means to be open to God's work and, within such a context, celibacy creates an opportunity for an exclusive focus and practice (Pennington 1993, 667-668).

Obedience, silence and moderation are important aspects of monastic life. Obedience is to the order (in particular to the Superior of each community, who represents Christ as its head when giving direction), its purpose being that good order, co-operation and happiness may result (Pennington 1993, 668); silence frees members of the community from listening to each other in order to be able to listen to God (Pennington 1993, 668); moderation, including abstinence, is valued for its potential in evoking a spiritual hunger for God (Pennington 1993, 669), all bound within the notion of peace which is found in all monastic traditions (Pennington 1993, 670).

Mass, benediction and other liturgical acts may be regarded as spiritual practices which are followed throughout the whole church, exhibiting a high level of continuity despite significant cultural differences. Additionally within monasticism the Liturgy of the Hours or Divine Office<sup>14</sup> is particularly significant, involving the daily celebration of communal liturgy at the third hour of each three hour period (Guiver 2005, 471-473). Liturgy is a means, using sign, symbol, word and music, whose purpose is a deepening relationship with God (Pennington 1993, 668). *Lectio Divina* is central to the monastic Rule of Benedict and comprises four elements; *lectio*, receptive reading such that God's love may be most intimately revealed (Pennington 1993, 669); *meditatio*, a non-discursive, non-reasoning approach to meditation involving a receptivity to God's communication (Pennington 1993, 669) or memorisation and repetition as a way of ruminating on particular texts (Irwin 1993, 596); *oratio*, prayer arising in the process of reading, listening and ruminating, in order to repeat to God that which he has given (Magrassi 1990, 113) and *contemplatio*, the wordless contemplation of God which transcends reasoning, thinking and emotions (Hall 1988, 9), offering a means of communication and deepening relationship with God. Monastic routines rarely change, demanding patience, faith and obedience to God, making this lifestyle

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<sup>14</sup> Also known as the Divine Office or as *opus dei*, the Work of God, though not to be confused with the organisation Opus Dei.

of sanctification difficult to sustain (Pennington 1993, 669-670), though such routinisation may provide a means to greater attentiveness and awareness of God (Russell 1993, 64).

Asceticism, derived from the Greek *áskēsis* meaning "exercise" or "training", implies a focused preparation in order to attain one's primary objective (Russell 1993, 65). Although often associated with monasticism, though not unique to Christianity, its purpose is a means of acquiring self-identity and self-knowledge through greater receptivity and communicability with God (Radar 1983, 24). Evagrius considered asceticism a route to eliminating distractions which prevent unwavering attention to and communication with God through prayer (Louth 2005, 131), whilst Pennington suggests that asceticism is a discipline facilitating recognition and acceptance of aspects of the self, (e.g. emotions such as love, anger, ambition and revenge), thereby freeing the individual from "the violence of unbridled passion" (Pennington 1993, 670). Asceticism may operate to help practitioners fulfil the gospel command to love God and neighbour (Radar 1983, 28), subduing natural desires through celibacy and poverty by which a detachment from material objects can be realised, thereby affording greater ability to master sinfulness and temptation, contemplate spiritual matters and live a Christian life in preparation for Christ's return (Radar 1983, 24-25). The notion of sin obscuring true perception, and ascetic practices used to aid the attainment of

passionlessness as a means of controlling irrational urges and disturbances to the mind, which otherwise prevent it focusing on God (Russell 1993, 63-64), support the view that asceticism can enhance one's focus on God and His service through avoiding distractions which may hinder or prevent spiritual progress rather than on self-denial (Russell 1993, 64).

There is an important connection between martyrdom and monasticism. Martyrdom was initially considered the more perfect way to follow Christ, however as this became less accessible after Constantine ended the persecution of Christians communal asceticism flourished as a symbolic dying to self in the service of others (Radar 1983, 26). Suffering was considered good because it was a means of sharing in Christ's passion (Russell 1983, 64). Irish monasticism introduced penance to asceticism but lost its therapeutic benefit when it became associated with settling accounts and corporal mortification (Russell 1993, 64).

Contemporary ascetic practices are more moderate and are now located within the context of an integrated person, rather than as part of a dualistic soul/body model, aiming at aiding simplicity and peace as part of the search for God which is involved in a process of self-fulfilment (Radar 1983, 27). Many practices of the desert fathers and mothers are largely forgotten (Russell 1983, 65) because contemporary



asceticism is about spiritual perfection within the context of the “outgrowth of human wholeness” (Radar 1983, 28) and seen as part of the effort “Christians in training” make to conform their lives to the faith they profess (Russell 1983, 65).

### **Non-monastic Traditions**

Dupres and Saliers report that spirituality respects and offers an accumulation of cultural forms capable of mediating revelations of God through experiential practices such as liturgical forms, prayer books and monastic practices now accessible to non-monasticists (Dupres and Saliers 1989, xxii). Some contemporary figures, such as Thomas Merton, have sought novel methods for incorporating monastic traditions into everyday life (Tracy 1989, 161) and there are lay orders within some monastic traditions (Short 2005, 312).

The liturgical movement encourages greater participation in the Mass, making more explicit the connection between the Mass and daily life (Bacik 2002, 33). Rahner promotes a form of spirituality incorporating the sacred and the secular in his incarnational spirituality which sees God at work in the whole of creation, where each person needs to be alert to God’s communications in order to become closer to Him (Bacik 2002, 34-35) Downey notes that “Rahner recognised human experience as a locus of God’s revealing disclosure” (Downey 1997, 33). This type of revelation occurs through experience and is

understood through the mediation of the church as a foundational and significant aspect of contemporary Catholic life (Bacik 2002, 34-35). The liturgical life is an important means of spiritual expression, accessible to the non-monastic parts of the church.

Opus Dei is a non-monastic order within Roman Catholicism, established by Msgr. Jose Maria Escrivá as an organisation for laity, its objective being the "...santification of its members through the practice of Christian virtue in each member's state of life and profession" by means of prayer, humility and strict adherence to the order's teachings (Crowley 1993, 714). It has been criticized however for practices which, though once common in religious orders, are no longer considered necessary or appropriate (Crowley 1993, 714). Some monastic orders assist the laity in deepening their spiritual life, for example the Jesuits who offer the *Spiritual Exercises* of their founder St Ignatius to people other than members of the order and assist organizations, such as the Epiphany Group in Edinburgh, to promote Ignatian spirituality.

The complex and detailed methods developed by monastic traditions include individual/community dualism and routinisation and simplification of lifestyle for the promotion of humility, gratitude and authenticity. Although these approaches have been practised within monasticism for many centuries they have become increasingly available to the laity.

## **Celtic Spirituality**

Celtic Christianity refers to a distinct family of languages and artistic, cultural and social phenomena identified with the geographic regions of Scotland, Wales, Ireland, Brittany, Cornwall and the Isle of Man (Davies & Bowie 1995, 2). The term implies that the inhabitants of these areas had a different attitude towards the world, nature and community, which enabled them to follow Christianity in ways significantly different to that of “typical” Western Christianity, with greater similarities to indigenous spiritualities (O’Loughlin 2005, 183). Hale claims Celtic Christianity was “...emphatically monastic” (Hale 2005, 445). *Celtic* was a Roman Geographical term (Davies & O’Loughlin 1994, 4) re-discovered by Buchanan and Lloyd in the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries respectively (Davies and O’Loughlin 1999, 4) and, although the term Celtic spirituality arose at this time, it would not have been recognisable to the people of that time. The basic Latin liturgy of the Roman Empire supported the ease of integration of Celtic monks with other Christians and Christian institutions throughout Western Europe (O’Loughlin 2005, 183), though there was also interweaving between pre-Christian religious systems and Christianity, such as the association of St Brigid and the pagan goddess Briggitta, and circular formation and old buildings being re-used with Christian interpretations (Macquarrie 1983, 38-39). Whilst monasteries north of the Mediterranean followed The Rule of Benedict, Celtic monasticism,

although possessing cultural and linguistic similarities to the Latin form, retained its distinct identity, history and expressions of spirituality (Davies and Bowie 1994, 3) but was not wholly dissimilar to Western Christianity generally (O'Loughlin 2005, 183). The differing forms never lost contact (Davies and Bowies 1994, 8) which enabled the Celtic form to maintain the tradition of Christian living and piety during the Dark Ages (Macquarrie 1983, 83). Contemporary views of Celtic Christianity refer to the period between mid-fifth and mid-seventh century, though this era refers to the earlier times of Patrick, Columba, Brigid and Columbanus for which there is little direct evidence (Bradley 1999, 1), however Celtic forms can be divided in two distinct but related languages: Brythonic Celts of England, Wales and South Scotland, ("British" language Celts) and the Goedelic Celts of Ireland, Western Scotland and the Isle of Man (Davies and Bowie 1994, 8) who maintained connections, especially through sea links (Davies & Bowie 1994, 8). Ireland, not being conquered by Rome, was not influenced by Roman culture, unlike the Brythonic grouping (Davies & Bowie 1994, 8, O'Laoghaire 1993, 134), although many 'Celtic' Christian documents are Welsh, an early English term for 'Romanized Celt' (Davies and Bowie 1994, 11)) therefore likely to be more romanized than the Irish tradition (Davies & Bowie 1994, 11). Ireland in the times of Patrick and Palladius operated a diocesan church structure with

similarities to the Roman Church within Western Europe (Davies and Bowie 1994, 14).

Celtic societies shared certain features: the central role of religion and ritual; warrior cultures valuing attributes of strength and valour; craftsmanship (Davie and Bowie 1994, 5-6) and exhibit more sympathy to the natural world than other forms of Christianity (Bradley 1999, ix). Macquarrie proposes man as dwelling within a “sacral environment” (Macquarrie 1983, 83), referring to John Scotus Eriugena as “the greatest thinker” and theologian of the ‘Celtic tradition’, proposing no dualistic separation between God and the world (Macquarrie 1983, 83). A major difference between the Celtic and Roman tradition was the Augustinian focus on sin and guilt. Celtic Christianity did not embrace the pessimism of Augustinian thought (Bradley 1999: 202-203).

The tradition in Scotland was oral, possibly protected by geographical remoteness, and was not collected or reduced to writing until Carmichael’s “*Carmina Gadelica*”, which was composed largely of poems and hymns (Macquarrie 1983, 83). Scripture was held in high regard, with particular reverence for the Psalms (O’Laoghaire 1993, 136). In Ireland there was a greater mixture of textual and oral retention (Davies and Bowie 1994, 16-17).

Celtic culture was highly communal, being both “*tribal*” (Davies and Bowie 1994, 14), and formed through a kinship pattern with ruling

families (Davies and Bowie 1994, 14) within which oral traditions could be maintained and shared. Community dependence facilitated the function of poets as well as offering a physical representation of the Trinity, thus placing the Godhead at the centre of daily living (Davies and Bowie 1994, 20) and was a basis by which monasticism grew quickly within the concept of a spiritual community (Davies and Bowie 1994, 14). The Irish tradition was spread to Scotland by Colum Cille (Columba), eventually dominating the western portion of Scotland (Davies and Bowie 1994, 15). The ascetical life of the Desert Fathers was influential, with many seeking such a life either alone (hermitical) or in groups (cenobitic) (Davies and Bowie 1994, 19-20), including martyrdom, which was highly regarded and seen as accessible through the acceptance of the religious life (white martyrdom), the practice of a penitential life eg exile (blue martyrdom) or the sacrifice of one's life for Christ's sake (red martyrdom) (O'Laoghaire 1993, 136). The acceptance of physical discomfort was practised not for punishment but to aid acknowledgement of the interdependence of soul and body in providing opportunities for spiritual growth (Davies and Bowie 1994, 20).

We have been able to identify in this section attributes of Celtic Christianity including the integration of religious practice and daily living within a penitential, though not penal, mode of living, which connect body and soul in the spiritual journey and are located in community,

enabling the oral transmission of tradition which brings the remembrance of the immanent presence of God and respect for His creation to constant attention. Davies and Bowies note, “In sum therefore, the distinctive tenor of Celtic Christianity is one of a life-affirming integration which finds its theological centre in the vision of God as divine creativity and community” (Davies and Bowie 1994, 21).

### **Spiritual Writings and Writers**

Francis of Assisi wrote that God had revealed to him that he should live according to the pattern of the Holy Gospel (Short 2005, 310). Scripture had long been held to be sacred (Nowell 1993, 854). Within Scotland particular regard is given to Scripture (Bradley 2005, 567-569) and the influence of the Second Vatican Council on Catholic spirituality has been to “...rediscover[ed] the Reformed emphasis on the Word” (Tracy 1989, 168).

Scripture’s significance in Christian spirituality includes the connotation of its being both word and event (Nowell 1993, 854), its centrality within Christian liturgy (Nowell 1993, 861) as well as the sense that its meaning occurs in the interaction between scriptural text and reader (Schneiders 2005, 66), making Scripture both a vibrant collection, recording God’s relationship with humankind, and a living, active source of revelation.

In addition to Scripture there have been many other inspirational writers whose texts are not considered to be canonical but who provide important sources of inspiration, illustration and understanding. Non-canonical writings take many forms, including narrative texts, journals, autobiographies, letters, sermons and commentaries, rules and treatises, all revealing specific forms of practiced or experienced spirituality (Hellman 1993, 922-930).

We now consider a selection of such writers.

### **St. John<sup>15</sup>**

John's Gospel had a profound effect on the Christian tradition, especially its emphasis on community love and its use of metaphor (Bond 2000, 347), with Jesus' symbolic actions, miracles and signs offering participation in his life (Schneiders 2005, 386). The use of 'signs' rather than 'miracles' by John and the notion of a 'realised eschatology,' that eternal life is not available on the last day alone but is "already a present possibility" (Bond 2000, 348, Schneiders 2005c, 385-387) suggests relationship with God is a significant aspect of his writing. Johannine Spirituality is centred on Jesus having the Life of God (eternal life), which is available to humankind through an active

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<sup>15</sup> St John the Apostle was the son of Zebedee and brother of the apostles James and Peter. He was prominent in the early church and despite suffering persecution under Domitian escaped and died of old age in Ephesus. He is noted as being the 'beloved' disciple and took Jesus' mother as his adopted mother. He is generally regarded as the author of the Gospel of St John (Farmer 1978, 213-214).



process (Schneiders 2005c, 386), divine/human communication being bi-directional through God's revelation and individuals' responses, leading to a "progressive creation of a shared life" (Schneiders 2005c, 386). Characteristics of Johannine spirituality present as giving priority to union and presence over dogma and morality, with an emphasis on spirit rather than rules, leading to the experience of an intensely personal spirituality whilst simultaneously being part of a community, the criterion for holiness being the love of Jesus (Schneiders 2005c, 387).

### **St Paul<sup>16</sup>**

Paul's spirituality is experiential: derived from his own personal experience of Christ (Dunn 1983, 289) and founded upon grace, love and life in Christ (Deidun 2005:479-480). The importance of recognising total dependence on God and God's grace, as evidenced through Christ's death (Dunn 1983, 289), manifests in spiritual growth arising from sharing in Christ's suffering; recognition "...that grace comes to its fullest expression in weakness" (Dunn 1983, 290). Love which is active in communities is the "...reverberation of God's love for us in Christ" (Deidun 2005, 480).

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<sup>16</sup> Paul was a Jew born in Tarsus around 65A.D, originally named Saul. Raised as a Pharisee he persecuted Christians until he experienced a vision of Christ on the road to Damascus from which he felt called to bring the Christian faith to Gentiles. One of his key theological contributions was of Christ abrogating the Old Law, beginning the "era of the Spirit". He was executed in Rome by beheading during the reign of Nero (Farmer 2011, 345-346).

Paul's focus is not exclusively on the historical Jesus but rather on self-giving as exemplified by Christ; not moral conformity but full participation, which is both experiential and community-orientated rather than intellectual and individualistic (Deidun 2005, 480), the term believers used intentionally in the plural (Marchall 1974, 758). Dunn interprets 'being in Christ' as being a member of the body of Christ and so being both dependent on grace administered through different members of the body, as a means of grace for others, thus "...neither by himself nor for himself" (Dunn 1983, 290).

There is a tension in Paul's spirituality between the power of the Risen Christ yet not being free from the 'body of death', leading to the paradox of life in Christ with the "appetites and weaknesses of this bodily existence" (Dunn 1983, 290). Paul considered the body to be both the locus of salvation and the instrument of disobedience, hence his call to be 'living sacrifices' (Roman 12: 1). Thereafter the spiritual life is "...the arduous business of ordinariness [is] the 'sacred space' of Christian worship" (Deidun 2005, 480). Paul's spirituality calls for living "according to the spirit" in priority to living under the law, living under which Dunn contends leads to excessive legalism but not life in the spirit (Dunn 1983, 290).

### **St Augustine<sup>17</sup>**

Augustine (354 – 430)<sup>18</sup> established a voluntary community for clergy through which his Rule became influential because of its combination of monastic discipline and its care of souls (O'Daly 1999, 160). Augustine's spirituality contains several essential elements: Jesus Christ, grace, inner-directedness, communality, love, truth, monasticism, progressiveness and scripture (Martin 2005, 136-138), a central pillar being Christ as Way, being the graciousness of God and human dependence upon same (Harrison 2000, 54), constituting a means by which a relationship with God can be sustained and enriched.

Although Augustine emphasised the importance of interiority (Martin 2005, 137), community exemplified the shared nature of the Christian life, its hallmark being "...one soul and one heart intent upon God" (Acts 4: 32; Harrison 2000, 54; Clark 1993, 71). Augustine viewed marriage not as an antithesis to monasticism but as an alternative mode through which the same ideals of unity, harmony and fidelity could be shared (Harrison 2000, 54) because both were founded on

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<sup>17</sup> Augustine was born in Tagaste, North Africa to a devout Christian mother and an influential but not wealthy father (O'Daly 1999, 159). He converted to Christianity in Milan in 386, was ordained a presbyter at Hippo and subsequently Bishop (Wright 1988, 58). He died 28<sup>th</sup> August 430.

<sup>18</sup> Writings by or about St Augustine include *On Faith and Works*; *Confessions*; *Political Writings*; *Arianism and other Heresies*; *Answer to the Pelagians*; *The City of God*; *The Augustine Catechism : Enchiridion on Faith, Hope and Love*; *St Augustine: The Monastic Rules*.

the notion of love, considered by Augustine to be “the summation of the whole Christian life” (Martin 2005, 137).

Augustine’s spirituality incorporated humility as an element of purification (Clark 1993, 67-68) which enabled the Christian life to be an on-going conversation and response to God (Martin 2005, 138).

### **St Benedict<sup>19</sup>**

Benedict of Nursia’s (circa 480 – 543)<sup>20</sup> modification of the Rule of the Master has been highly influential (Kardong 2005, 148) and is experiential. It must be “...lived in order to be understood,” viewing a monk’s vocation as “...a dynamic journey towards God” (Truran 2000, 68). Central elements of this rule include stability (being grounded within a community of monks), fidelity (to a monastic life including renunciation of personal property, silence, prayer, humility and chastity) and obedience, (to the prompting of the Holy Spirit) (Truran 2000, 68). The abbot of the monastery is obliged to treat all within the monastery as his family (Bienert 1999, 226). His Rule calls for “strict but a moderate” asceticism, balancing prayer, work, study/contemplation and action (Bienert 1999, 226-227) and reflects Benedict’s conviction that

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<sup>19</sup> Benedict was schooled in Rome but, repulsed by the licentious lifestyles he observed, undertook a monastic life. After a time in solitude at Sacro Speco (Butler 1919,1,2,8) he formed twelve monasteries of twelve men and a cenobitic community at Monte Cassino (Henry 1999, 225). His sister, Scholastica, formed a convent for women (Bienert 1999, 226).

<sup>20</sup> Writings by or about Benedict include *Rule of Benedict* and O’Donovan’s *Benedict of Nursia*.

the daily routine of prayer, meditation and reflective reading are essential in the spiritual life (Henry 1999, 225) as it leads to mindfulness of the constant omnipresence of God which is extended to see Christ in others (Stewart 1998, 28, 29), even to the extent that “weakest and most marginal persons... they too be treated with reverential awe” (Kardong 2005, 149). Benedict also considered that God’s presence was especially to be found in the celebration of the Divine Office and therefore its performance was to be conducted with particular care (Kardong 2005, 85).

### **St Ignatius of Loyola<sup>21</sup>**

Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556)<sup>22</sup> was inspired by religious writings such as the *Life of Christ* by Ludolph of Saxony and *Golden Legends* by Jacobus de Voragine, a very popular book at this time. Following a visit to the monastery in Monserrrat in 1522 and a mystical illumination in 1523 Ignatius felt compelled to a spiritual life (Selge 2001a, 656). As a man of strong imagination his dreams of service of Christ provoked in him a reaction of peace and joy (Bedolla and Totaro

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<sup>21</sup> Ignatius of Loyola was born Inigo Lopez de Onaz y Loyola , a Basque nobleman who served as an officer in the viceroy of Navarre and was wounded in 1521. Following a spiritual conversion during a period of convalescence he became a priest and with six others founded the Society of Jesus in 1534. The Society was sanctioned by Pope Paul III in 1540. He moved to Rome in 1537 where he lived until his death. In 1548 the Spiritual Exercises were published (McGinn 2006, 353-356).

<sup>22</sup> Writings by or about Ignatius of Loyola include *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus*; *A Pilgrim’s Journey*; *Inigo: Discernment Log-book*; *Spiritual Exercises*; *Letters and Instructions*.

1990, 172). After a period of monastic life he felt a sense of grace that freed him from the need for confession (Bedolla and Totaro 1990, 173).

He founded the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) which demands vows of chastity and poverty and is bound by obedience rather than stability (Bedolla and Totaro 1990, 173-174). Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*, his core guidance and training, provide a system which assists an individual to seek and discern God's will and act as a channel of grace whereby the person may be enabled to put God's will into active practice (Bedolla and Totaro 1990, 174) by inculcating attitudes towards the use of imagination, experience of God acting directly, the importance of reflection on personal experiences and an awareness that God can be found in all things (Hastings 2000, 339).

### **St Teresa of Avila<sup>23</sup> and St John of the Cross<sup>24</sup>**

Teresa of Avila's (1515-1582)<sup>25</sup> writings provide an insight into stages of spiritual growth and in particular the spiritual journey

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<sup>23</sup>Born Dona Teresa de Ahumada to a Christian household in 1515 in Avila, Spain, St Teresa was influenced by an Augustinian convent school before entering the Carmelite Convent of the Incarnation in Avila in 1536. After a long, dry period of prayer, based on then popular meditative exercises, she entered a mystical phase in 1554 during which she received visions and locutions and was aided in understanding these by some learned friends. She founded the reformed Carmelite Order at St Joseph Convent, Avila, in 1565 and died in 1582 (Carmichael 2001, 208).

<sup>24</sup>Juan de Yepes, also known as St John of the Cross, was born in Fontiveros near Avila in 1542, joining the Carmelite friars in 1563. He worked with Teresa of Avila from 1568 in reforming the Carmelite movement, but was kidnapped in 1577. Following the creation of the separate 'Discalced' Carmelites in 1580, he served as prior at Granada and Segovia until his death in 1591 (Carmichael 2001, 208-209).

<sup>25</sup> Writings by or about Teresa of Avila include *Way of Perfection*; *Interior Castle*; *the Book of the Foundations*; *the Life of Teresa of Jesus*; *Teresa of Avila*.

(Carmichael 2001, 108), describing it as proceeding through seven rooms of a castle. The journey begins outside, with conversion leading to the first room. Through prayer and spiritual practices the seeker passes through phases including overcoming discouragement; seeking and relying on God rather than self; developing a contemplative life; love for neighbours; acknowledging that following Christ involves pain and suffering; a sense of desolation and unexpected joy (noted as accompanying spiritual growth), all leading ultimately to the seventh room which is peace and stability (Peers1989, 10-15). For Teresa, progress was measured by charity to others and an attention to a daily life of prayer and work accompanied by an increasing awareness of God's constant presence (Green 2005, 46).

St John of the Cross (1542 – 1591)<sup>26</sup> joined the Carmelite friars in 1563 and met St. Teresa in 1568 (Payne 1990, 247). He was involved in a ministry of spiritual direction (Payne 1990, 247), with his writings offering direction for people committed to a closer relationship with God, incorporating meditative and contemplative prayer (Carmichael 2001, 210). John's writings describe a journey towards detachment from all that is created in order to form a direct relationship with God (Carmichael 2001, 210). His approach to spirituality was grounded in the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity rather than

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<sup>26</sup> Writings by or about John of the Cross include *The Dark Night of the Soul*; *A Spiritual Canticle of the Soul and the Bridegroom Christ*; *Ascent of Mount Carmel*; *The Poems*; *St John of the Cross*.

in mystical attributes of "...apparitions, ecstasies and occult states of consciousness" (Payne 1990, 249).

Teresa and John both advocated the attributes of solitude, silence, detachment, meditation and devotion to the humanity of Christ (Payne 1990, 254) in addition to the Carmelite School of preparation, reading, meditation, thanksgiving, offering, petition and acquired contemplation (Payne 1990, 254).

### **Thomas Merton<sup>27</sup>**

Thomas Merton (1915 - 1968)<sup>28</sup> had a difficult and confused childhood, teenage and early adult life. After experiencing a religious conversion he joined the Roman Catholic Church and entered Gethsemani Abbey, Kentucky, as a Trappist monk (Palmer 1983, 264).

His influence is primarily within the recovery of the mystical tradition, converted into contemporary terms by applying potentially conflicting spiritualities into "...plausible spiritual options for the spiritual life" (Tracy 1989, 160). His theological tensions are persistent concerns

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<sup>27</sup> Thomas Merton was born in Prades, France on 31<sup>st</sup> January 1915 and had a brother John Paul. Both his parents died whilst he was in childhood and he was partially educated in Oakham, England. He was baptised into the Roman Catholic faith on 16th November 1938, entered the Trappist community at the Abbey of Gethsemani on 10<sup>th</sup> December 1941 and died in Thailand on 10<sup>th</sup> December 1968.

<sup>28</sup> Writings by or about Merton include *Between Work and Prayer, Prayer and Work; Christianity and Mass Movements; Contemplation in a World of Action; Contemplative Prayer; Discovering the Silence; Ecumenism and Monastic Renewal; Final Integration: Towards a Monastic Therapy; Learning to Love; Liturgy and Spiritual Personalism; Love and Living; No man Is An Island; Passivity and Abuse of Authority; Sacramental Illumination; Seeds of Contemplation; Spirituality for the Age of Overkill; The Monastic Journey; The Seven Storey Mountain; The Sign of Jonas; The Waters of Siloe; Thomas Merton: Contemplation and Political Action.*



in spirituality such as balancing prayer life and action, freedom and authority and fostering personal relationships that lead closer to God (Bacik 2002, 48). Interweaving a pluralistic, credible Catholicism with the restless, monadic, unsettled life in modernity led Merton to a spirituality in the apophatic tradition, exploring writers such as John of the Cross and Julian of Norwich together with new readings of image mysticism within the Cistercian tradition, all applied to the notion that each person is an image of God's own self (Tracy 1989, 160-161). This approach facilitated an opportunity for individuals not committed to a monastic lifestyle to participate in the monastic traditions whilst remaining in the world (Tracy 1989, 161). Merton was influential in the revival of hesychast spirituality in the West (Sherrard 1989, 425) and the interaction of Christian life and faith with Hinduism and Buddhism, especially Christian mystical traditions and Hinduism (Saliers 1989, 526).

Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King Jr, Merton, Mother Teresa and others have advocated new forms of Christian life in which activist and contemplative strands interweave, driven by the necessity in modern society of linking interiority with engagement of self and community in the struggle for justice and the restoration of a relationship with nature (Saliers 1989:540-541), with widespread appearance of such concerns through worshipping communities forming solidarity (Saliers 1989: 540). A motivation for action on peace and justice was the suggestion

that “Christians are freed from the world for the world” (Tracy 1989, 161), coupled with a call to be pilgrims, travelling to find bridges to overcome that which alienates people from each other and themselves (Palmer 1983, 265).

### **Michel De Certeau**

Michel De Certeau (1925 - 1986)<sup>29</sup> was born in Chambrey, France, and had a long interest in becoming a missionary. After joining the Jesuits in 1950 and being ordained a priest in 1956 (Ward 2000, 3-4), he studied at the Sorbonne during the riots of 1968 and found his vocation in examining the sub-culture present at that time (Ward 2000, 5). From this he developed his examination of the structures underpinning the lives of individuals, observing how desire was a response to a lack of fulfilment, and suggesting that life involved seeking the satisfaction of a desire, of which belief was an integral part because it is not possible for humans to live without believing (Ward 2000, 5-6). He is regarded as an influential postmodern theologian, though Sheldrake contests the notion of his works being split into religious and social scientific parts, the latter being devoid of theology and immersed more into a “form of postmodern fragmentation and dispersal” (Sheldrake 2012, 207).

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<sup>29</sup> Writings by de Certeau include: *The Practice of Everyday Life*; *The Writing of History*; *Analysing Culture*; *The Possession at Loudun*; *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other* and *La Fable Mystique*.

Of relevance to this case study is de Certeau's contribution to exploring spiritual qualities in everyday practices, particularly in relation to how individuals develop spiritually. The influence of the Jesuits is identifiable in the themes about journeying and everyday practices, both because the concept of 'going gladly where sent' is a pillar of the Society and because the notion of seeing God in all things is significant in the Fourth Week of the Spiritual Exercises. By expanding the idea of journeying, de Certeau suggests that a dimension of Christian spirituality is avoiding the temptation to settle into a definitive place and that interpretation is a process of "work of the self for the self" (de Certeau 2000, 234), which Sheldrake interprets as denoting the Christian vocation being founded less on authority, such as dogmatic teachings, and more on following of the "perpetually elusive Christ" (Sheldrake 2012, 209). These concepts propose a relaxation in being tied to dogmatic teaching and greater attention to God's presence being found in all things, which underpins the notion of a highly personalised and experiential basis to spirituality and in particular to individuals' understanding of their spiritual lives.

In *The Weakness of Believing* de Certeau suggests that Christian spirituality ought to avoid the natural inclination to settle down into a definitive "place," such as the institutional church. Rather the Christian vocation is about following Christ, operating within "sites of social belonging" (de Certeau 2011, 236-237). By extension Christianity

becomes a fluid practice rather than a fixed locus (de Certeau 2011, 236) with specific procedures gaining priority over a body of doctrine (Sheldrake 2012, 210). The idea of procedures is apparent within the Jesuit movement which, with the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises and accompanying guidance, offers a means of discernment using a process of intuition through weighing experiences of consolation and desolation to interpret what God may be saying to the individual. Again, this approach supports the idea of detachment from rigid adherence to doctrine in favour of greater personal experience as the basis for one's response to Christ, which may be an interesting point in our case study.

Guiliani, who influenced de Certeau, asserted that everyday life was meant to be a spiritual exercise and Giard suggests that de Certeau proposed the notion of ordinary living as spiritual (Sheldrake 2012, 210) with a relationship determining its terms rather than terms determining a relationship (de Certeau 1984, xi). De Certeau illustrates the compartmentalisation of rationality which promotes a "state of reason" and its opposition to irrationality, which may offer space for self-expression, by using the analogy of a railway car (de Certeau 1984, 111). The railway line allows one to move through the landscape, the window allowing one to see only and not touch, whilst the "machine" draws the train and the individual (de Certeau 1984, 112-113). The isolation of the journey offers a space in which dreams and memories can emerge whilst the landscape passes as an "illegible"

frontier (de Certeau 1984, 113). Thus the train, comprising both engine and carriages, represents a rational construct for the journey. Whilst one must largely submit to such a construct in order to travel, there remains opportunity for self-understanding. Incarcerated within the railway car, the individual is without power yet de Certeau differentiates between 'strategies' which are linked to the structures of power and 'tactics', the development of space by those without power (Sheldrake 2012, 211) drawing out the idea of individuals having their own dreams and memories within the overarching construct. In the context of the case study this may be considered in terms of individuals being immersed in the practices of the Institution of the Roman Catholic Church whilst seeking their unique spiritual lives. If so then we may expect to observe participants' understandings as understood by reference to their relationship rather than the relationship being determined by doctrinal requirements. That is, the individual's experientially-based (and thus not necessarily fully rationalised) concept of their relationship with God takes precedence over the church's teachings, though the need for the church is indispensable (Bauerschmidt 2011, 210-211).

De Certeau offers a number of interesting points for application to our case study, the purpose of which is to assess the hermeneutic phenomenological methodology:

- a. It offers a means to gain insight into how and if everyday practices are important in spirituality
- b. It may illuminate whether priority is given to the individual or the institution
- c. It may assist in identifying whether spirituality, in this context, is a continually formative process or a static adherence to teachings.

These spiritual thinkers illustrate a number of common features within Christian spirituality such as the centrality of Christ, the role of community, prayer and routine, personal experience of God in the ordinariness of daily living and developing personal attitudes of gratitude, humility, reliance and authenticity. A school of spirituality develops from these writers proclaiming the love and grace of God, the possibility of an experiential relationship with Christ, calling for concern and action towards communities, the world and creation through a life of humility, gratitude and authenticity.

Having considered the influence of spiritual writings and writers on Christian spirituality, it is now necessary to consider other important factors within or influencing Christian spirituality.

### **Ritual, Symbol and Metaphor**

A metaphor may be regarded as an object used in the place of another object, in order that a likeness between the objects may become apparent and involves the use of a better known object to ascribe some of its characteristics to a lesser known object (Martinich 1998, 335-338).

A symbol is a sensible reality that represents another thing, by which meaning can be mediated and revelation facilitated (Madigan 1993, 953). Expressions of or about God, whether anaphatic or cataphatic, are always incomplete and inadequate (Turner 1995, 19-21) leading to tools such as symbol and metaphor being frequently employed to aid expression by operating through a “synthetic insight” process rather than by discursive reasoning, symbols having no single determinative meaning (Dulles 2003, 663). Symbols form part of semiotics, which within religion may be observed as, ‘...large-scale thematic signs that are defined in networks of other symbols’ and find expression in ‘several media such as language, visual and plastic arts, music, drama ...,’ (Neville 2005, 607), the difference between signs (which have a fixed meanings) and symbols (which are representative and capable of accumulating meaning) being the fluidity of symbols (Madigan 1993, 953). Symbolism’s origin lies in juxtapositioning to facilitate comparison and identification in situations where visible material objects can be used to identify something invisible or

immaterial (Somerville 2003, 660). Somerville categorises symbols into their representative forms as images, signs, gestures and analogues (Somerville 2003, 661) and categorical forms (Somerville 2003, 661) as:

arbitrary symbols: not natural but established by decree (otherwise stenographic or code symbols), associative symbols: symbol and meaning are connected through an implicit mid-term, eg a key representing authority with historical association to ownership or stewardship, evocative symbols: meaning by feelings and attitudes thereby engendered. (Somerville 2003: 661)

Symbols are only effective when both symbol and meaning are known, or at least suspected: for example a believer's faith may be deepened through symbolism which may have little meaning to a non-believer (Somerville 2003, 661), though indeterminacy also serves to unify diverse elements, allowing symbols to have an integrative function (Dulles 2003, 662).

Religious symbols do not need to imitate that represented, however many symbols do have a perceivable connection to the subject, thus carrying an emotive quality, evoking both intellectual assent and affective response (Somerville 2003, 661), suggesting that many of the most pregnant religious symbols lie between *iconic* i.e.



pictorial, leaving little room for mental activity and *stenographic*, inviting mental activity but not carrying depth and affection (Somerville 2003, 661-662). Appropriate symbolism is powerfully influential on both mind and heart, "...charged with affectivity and intelligibility" (Somerville 2003, 662), including meanings of absence and concealment as well as presence and revelation (Madigan 1993, 554). Symbols communicate, at different levels, meanings that are not accessible through thought or experience (Dulles 2003, 62) though the symbol fails when it ceases to invite participation (Madigan 1993, 953). Symbols do not require consistency and are often confluences of themes within traditions but "families of conceptually inconsistent symbols resonate to together ... to provide pivotal points for liturgy" (Neville 2005, 607).

The elimination of symbolism from spirituality risks reducing spirituality to merely intellectualism (Somerville 2003, 662) which suggests that symbolism is an inherent and fundamental dimension of spirituality.

Symbolism differs from ritual by not requiring an initiation into meanings (Madigan 1993, 955) whereas ritual is a specific structured activity, the purpose of which is to facilitate individuals to relate to themselves, others and the environment around them (Madigan 1993, 955, 832). Empereur describes ritual as a "...patterned symbolic activity" (Empereur 2005, 546), which in religious rituals facilitates the conveyance of meaning of something greater than the ritual process

itself and is involved in the formation and expression of personal and community identity (Madigan 1993, 832), the enactment creating an embodiment of abstract principles which can become potent (Davies 2011, 274)

Rituals are a form of enacted symbolism unifying participant with the sacred (Madigan 1993, 832) and are capable of creating community and expressing beliefs, stories and identities in the most profound areas of human existence (Empereur 2005, 546). There is thus an insufficiency in only reading: a ritual is "...a text [that] must be performed to surrender its meaning" (Empereur 2005, 546). Although rituals may be expressed differently in differing cultures, central concepts are retained, thus in Christianity sacramental understandings may change whilst the sacramental symbolism remains constant (Madigan 1993, 832).

Turner noted a three stage process in rites of passage or initiation: separation, marginality (characterised by threshold or anti-status) and reintegration (Empereur 2005, 546). The ritual process can be understood as an element in personality development, providing a more balanced view of the world and a safety valve for emotional reactions, and is thus capable of structuring human behaviour through embodied knowledge containing emotional, imaginative and kinaesthetic forms of understanding, leading to meaning-forming for everyday life (Empereur 2005, 546).

Thus ritual and symbolism operate to convey meaning and understanding through non-verbal communication, which may be restricted to a community but can carry different meanings to varying sub-communities therein.

### **Reciprocity and Gift Exchange**

In the case study we will consider the application of Gift Theory or Reciprocity as a factor within contemporary spirituality as explored therein. The concept of reciprocity within the field of anthropology relates to exchange. Marcel Mauss's "The Gift" (Mauss, 2011) essentially describes gift giving as containing three elements: the giving of a gift, the acceptance of the gift and the obligation to return the gift (Mauss 2011, 63). A gift does not need be material, such as a necklace (Mauss 2011, 21), but may be immaterial, such as an invitation. Thus, although gift exchange appears *ex facie* voluntary and unidirectional, it is in reality an obligation (Mauss 2011, 63). Some contemporary examples of this are the exchange of Christmas presents, buying rounds in a pub or passing on children's toys and clothing. These practices help to create strong mutual obligation and cohesion (Eriksen 2004, 86) which is necessary for a society founded in part upon reciprocity, in which both care of the wider community and self-reliance are important (Mauss 2011: 66-67). Mauss denotes three distinct areas in relation to gift-giving: (1) where it is essential for social integration

(reciprocity), (2) where the state or other such entity take on some functions of the gift eg the State and social insurance (Mauss 2011, 65) (redistribution) and (3) market-driven societies where gift exchange has been marginalised (Mauss 2011, 64). Exchange systems do not necessarily function for economic benefit but need to be located within context (Eriksen 2004, 88). Polanyi considered that reciprocity and redistribution were more humane than the competitive market (Polanyi 1944, 43).

Mauss' analysis of reciprocity within archaic societies found that the exchange took place within a highly ritualised context, for example on the Trobriand Islands (Mauss 2011, 19-22) or the North-west American tribes (Mauss 2011, 31-37), which facilitated symbolic relationships, drawing together the individual and their conception of their life-world and the society in which they lived (Eriksen 2004, 93).

The social cohesion identified in archaic societies (Eriksen 2004, 86) arises in part from a complex interweaving of obligations between participating individuals and communities within these societies and translates into more contemporary social structures (Mauss 2011, 4, 72-73, 81) where social cohesion can also be viewed more generally as creating an environment in which trade, relationships and status can be effectively negotiated.

The case study is located within the field of spirituality and not theology, so it is helpful to consider how reciprocity may operate within

the practice of Roman Catholicism. In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*<sup>30</sup> Part Three, Section One, Chapters 1, 2 and 3 we find a number of points of relevance which may be applied to a Roman Catholic sense of reciprocity, though again as the approach is from the discipline of spirituality, not theology, we are interested in teaching aspects which may offer a context within which to better understand participants, rather than adopt a theological stance which would be contrary to the methodology or discipline by seeking to apply a belief construct to individual's experiences rather than use these points to assist us in interpreting participants' descriptions.

It is essential that a person freely directs himself to the fulfilment of his vocation (paragraph 1700<sup>31</sup>). In paragraph 1724<sup>32</sup> this is described as following the path leading to the Kingdom of Heaven. Paragraph 1700 further states, "Human beings make their own contribution to their interior growth; they make their whole sentient and spiritual lives into means of this growth," describing an active participation. However an individual's response is key, as "by virtue of his soul and his spiritual powers of intellect and will, man is endowed with a freedom," (paragraph 1705<sup>33</sup>). Paragraph 1709<sup>34</sup> states, "He who believes in Christ becomes a son of God." This proposes reciprocity,

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<sup>30</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church (2000), London: Burns & Oats

<sup>31</sup> P383

<sup>32</sup> P387

<sup>33</sup> P384

<sup>34</sup> P384

because becoming a son of God is directly dependent on belief in Christ: belief, or trust is given and, in terms of these teachings, accepted in exchange for adoption as a son of God.

However, without crossing into theology, we can note the idea of belief encompassing action, namely directing oneself towards the fulfilment of one's vocation which is in part the desire for happiness<sup>35</sup> which is found in God alone<sup>36</sup> as a human's purpose is "to know, to love and to serve him and so to come to paradise"<sup>37</sup>. The Eucharist is the sacrament of redemption by which one receives Christ<sup>38</sup> (Paragraph 1846<sup>39</sup>). There is a direct correlation between the Offertory, through which thanks and symbols of willingness are given to God, and the Eucharist<sup>40</sup>. Within Roman Catholicism we can observe a form of reciprocity in the forgiveness of sins being offered and accepted, with an obligation to pursue a life in fulfilment of one's vocation.

*Gaudium et Spes*<sup>41</sup>, within the Second Vatican Council, may also be helpful in considering issues of reciprocity, acknowledging that man is a social being who needs to relate to others in order to develop his potential<sup>42</sup>. But it is within his conscience that God is met and from

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<sup>35</sup> Para 1718 on p386

<sup>36</sup> Para1723 on p387

<sup>37</sup> Para 1721 on p387

<sup>38</sup> Para1382 on p312.

<sup>39</sup> P407

<sup>40</sup> Para1333 on p299

<sup>41</sup> [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html)

<sup>42</sup> Ibid para 7

whence he is called to love good and join with others in the search for truth and the resolution of problems arising from social relationships<sup>43</sup>. Thus, although individuals may voluntarily seek God, in reality it occurs as a response to a calling by God and requires a response through the individual's actions in their social relationships and by extension in the world.

### **Community and Belonging**

Community can be described in terms of “having something in common”, distinguishing members of a community from those outwith, the ‘boundary’ being critical because it demarcates and thus defines the identity of the community (Cohen 2008, 12).

Tonnies differentiated community from society in terms of:

real and organic life – this is the essential characteristic of *Gemeinschaft* (community); or as imaginary and mechanical structure – this is the concept of *Gesellschaft* (society).

(Tonnies 2007, 33).

*Gemeinschaft* is then an enduring living together, in contrast to *Gesellschaft* which is transitory (Tonnies 2007, 35) and has a function to perform (Tonnies 2007, 35). Bilton suggests community is

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid para 16

characterized through "...close-knit, personal and stable relationships between friends and neighbours and based on a clear understanding of social position" (Bilton 2002, 38), raising the question of the reaction to globalisation manifest in the increasing prominence of culture, ethnicity and regionalism (Bilton 2002, 48), which is significant in offering an opportunity to clarify, differentiate and identify key characteristics of community within the context of this case study.

For our case study, Cohen's definition operates from the perspective of sameness within and difference outwith, and Tonnies operates in terms of function/transient or intimate/enduring. Within this understanding society may refer to a wider body operating on a functional basis and could include 'lapsed' Roman Catholics and 'spectators', whilst community refers to the body of active Roman Catholics for whom identity as Roman Catholic is important and who work and live in supportive groupings. However we may identify a further category: belonging with characteristics in addition to community, such as mutual sharing, caring, and willingness to expose vulnerabilities and offer/ receive support. Where community may be analogous to "close friends," belonging may be analogous to "close family" where unconditional acceptance, freedom and guidance are experienced.

In considering this differentiation in the concept of community, we note that both membership and belonging are influential in the



formation of identity. Roman Catholicism is a strong form of identity and is associated with a clearly defined community which appears, in Scotland, to be rooted anthropologically in its migrant background. This will be expanded on in the case study, however how identity operates in terms of understanding self and others is also relevant to the case study.

### **Identity**

Society is an important locus in identity formation by various means, eg nationality, religion, ethnicity, community, class, sexual orientation, gender, etc, and is not fixed but fluid, creating potentially conflicting identities and possibly a crisis of identity (Woodward 1997, 1). Woodward connects identity with “the circuit of culture”<sup>44</sup> (Woodward 1997, 2), contrasting the distinction between essentialist and non-essentialist positions, essentialists claiming belonging and identity are fixed, whereas non-essentialists claim identity is situation-specific and influenced by globalization (Woodward 1997: 12-16).<sup>45</sup> The essentialist position, being much more static, offers the possibility of a connection between identity and belonging and the essentialist claims relating to identity are about belongingness (Woodward 1997, 12).

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<sup>44</sup> The Circuit of Culture refers to a system formulated by Du Gay and others, describing a means by which identities are created, utilised, regulated, modified and discarded in order to create meaning (Du Gay *et al* 1997).

<sup>45</sup> Further discussion about the essentialist/non-essentialist debate and applicability is, though important, beyond the scope of this work. Of note here is the implied connection between belonging and a ‘fixed’ sense of identity.

There are three important aspects to the notion of identity: (i) self-identity, (ii) perception by others and (iii) conformity to the community. These three aspects arise from the association between identity and perception/understanding/meaning, with how one understands oneself influencing how one understands one's community. How others identify one determines that relationship and the interaction between the community and the individual determines how, and to what extent, the lens of community focuses understanding.

A further aspect of identity is the context of self and self-awareness, in which self-awareness is a process by which one compares how one is and how one would like to be (Hogg and Vaughan 2005, 119). Utilising the work of Carver and Scheier, Hogg and Vaughan distinguish between the private self, with its private feelings, thoughts, attitudes and the public self, one's public image or how one is seen by others (Hogg and Vaughan 2005, 119), suggesting that private self-awareness leads to behaviour that is in accordance with internal standards, whilst public self-awareness relates to the presentation of self to others in a positive manner.

### **Prayer**

Prayer may be understood as "literally a petition or request" (Wright 1993, 764), which involves "raising one's heart and mind to

God” (Sheldrake 2005, 504) and is “a response to God’s initiation of dialogue with us” (McBrien 1994, 348).

Whilst a discussion of prayer is beyond this work, it is helpful to note a few points. Prayer addresses God as “You”, rather than as “He”, identifying a relationship with God, as a person to whom one’s heart and mind are directed (Wright 1993, 765). Prayer is primarily located within community and, although personal, prayer emerges from and returns to community (Sheldrake 2005, 505). Mechanistic prayer or that orientated towards results can hinder prayer and periods of dryness, although frustrating, act as a reminder of the need to persevere, such action in itself being a form of prayer (Sheldrake 2005, 505). There are various types of prayer including vocal, mental, discursive, affective, prayer of meditation and contemplation, kataphatic, apophatic and centring prayer but essentially prayer is about life with God (Wright 1993: 773-775).

We turn now to consider briefly aspects of Roman Catholicism that may be pertinent to the case study.

## **SECTION II**

### **Roman Catholicism**

Within Roman Catholicism the Church is considered to be the society of believers in Christ (Tavard 1992, 16), through which

individuals learn doctrines about God (Hughes 1967, 1) to attain a supernatural destiny. The Church began as a small group gathered together following the crucifixion of Jesus before Pentecost (Hughes 1967, 1) and was born into a world "... where interest in religion was universal" (Hughes 1967, 3).

Theodosius was the first truly Christian emperor and held Christianity as the basis for law, providing bishops with formal state positions and recognising their jurisdiction on Christian issues, converting feast days to public holidays and sanctioning Lent as a holy season (Hughes 1967, 24).

The word 'Church' designates the social organisation of Christ's disciples and existed before Christian scriptures (Tavard 1992, 15-16), with the "Church militant' being the community of human creatures called to know and love God" (Tavard 1992, 16). Tavard thereby draws a parallel between the 'Church' and the Hebrew 'qahal', the assembly of Jewish people guided through the wilderness (Tavard 1992, 15). Gaillardetz states that it is through fellowship in the Christian community that an individual has fellowship with God, stressing the pneumatological dimension in reconfiguring a group of individuals into a communion of believers (Gaillardetz 1997, 10-11). The Johannine notion of communion is with God and other believers (Gaillardetz 1997, 11). McBrien defines Catholicism as "...a community of persons, who believe in God and shape their lives according to that belief" (McBrien

1994, 6), whilst McIntosh describes spirituality in terms of a new pattern of personal growth located within a community (McIntosh 1998, 6). Whilst McIntosh and Novak see the church as a community of individuals who speak, pray and co-operate to learn more about God and love better (Novak 2002, 98). For some it is only in being a part of the community of the Church that one may find salvation (Bultmann 1958, 41).

Primacy is given to the papacy, which claims supreme authority in the Church, based on Christ's promise to Peter that he would be the foundation of the Church (Matthew 16: 18-19), and Christ's charge to Peter, "Feed my sheep" (Ullman 2003, 829-830), from which the papacy claims two forms of authority: (1) magisterial, the final determination of doctrine and teaching, and (2) jurisdictional, the final determination in relation to governance, the exercise of jurisdictional primacy fulfilling the Papal duty to, "...direct the path of organised Christianity" (Ullman 2003, 830). Because the Church is a corporate, organised, juristic society as well as a spiritual and sacramental entity it needs constant guidance (Ullman 2003, 830). Through Theodosius' adoption of Christianity as the religion of the Roman empire the institution founded a formal system of government with the Church government centred in Rome, a place associated with double apostolicity (Saints Peter and Paul) (Ullman 2003, 832). As early as 90AD the church in Rome intervened in the affairs of the church in

Corinth and compelled the church in Ephesus to obey its authority in relation to liturgical issues (Hughes 1967, 14).

Leo I successfully argued that the successor *primus* of the Roman Church, however unworthy personally, was the heir of St Peter because in inheritance it is possible to gain the assets and liabilities of the deceased without the personal qualities or the deceased's merits and distinctions, differentiating between office and person so that the succeeding *primus* inherited the full Petrine Powers without necessarily being worthy of attaining the same by his own efforts (Ullman 2003, 832), the consequence being that however, or wherever, power is exercised in the Church it is derived from the pope (Ullman 2003, 833).

The *Power of Governance* is the authority to rule or govern and the Second Vatican Council teaching reflects the triple *munera* of Christ: priest, prophet and ruler (Kaslyn 2003: 374) with all the faithful constituting a form of priesthood, sharing in the proclamation of the Gospel and co-operating in the governance of God's people (Kaslyn 2003, 374). However, whilst the Second Vatican Council recognised baptism as a participation in a priesthood of Christ, such priesthood differs in essence from the priesthood of ordination (McBrien 1994, 872) because the priority for the Church is the proclamation of the Gospel, such that the *munera* rests with the People of God whilst the power of governance, which is to facilitate the proclamation of the

Gospel (Kaslyn 2003, 374) as with magisterium, rests with those who hold positions of authority in the Church (McBrien 1994, 65-66).

*Magisterium* is the teaching role of the bishops (Sullivan 1983, 25), the holders of these offices deriving authority as successors of the apostles (Sullivan 1983, 25, 27). The Bishops' capacities are: (1) sanctification (priestly office), (2) governance (kingly office) and (3) teaching (prophetic office) (Gaillardetz 1997, 35). In the early church the bishop represented and guaranteed unity within the church and community, which was an important function, especially in presiding over the Eucharist (Gaillardetz 1997, 36), locating the ecclesial authority of the bishop within an ecclesiology of the Eucharist (Gaillardetz 1997, 36). Papal primacy is exercised over the whole church, whereas the episcopate authority is exercised by bishops over their jurisdictional area (Rahner 1962, 21-22).

Following the New Testament period when the *parousia* could not be regarded as imminent, the Church sought to develop a liturgy that could act as both a remembrance of Christ's accomplishment and look hopefully to the future coming of Christ (McBrien 1994, 612). Being simultaneously transcendent and immanent means the visible church signifies the reality of the spiritual dimension and is itself a sacramental being, illuminating the intimate relationship between Christ and the Church (Gaillardetz 1997, 7). This sacramental nature is dualistic because it signifies the divine/human relationship and

actualises the spiritual development of individuals, using doctrines and theology to provide a framework within which liturgy and sacrament operate.

Doctrine is the official teaching about faith whilst theology is the critical reflection on faith (McBrien 1994, 21). Accordingly doctrine and theology cannot be readily separated, with much of the theological understanding of the Church forming the foundations of its doctrines. Theological considerations pertaining to spirituality are largely referred to as Spiritual Theology, which comprises Ascetic Theology and Mystical Theology (Aumann 1980, 13), where the former refers to the “active human pursuit of Christian perfection” (McIntosh 2005, 130) whilst Mystical Theology is “concerned with the extraordinary graces by which God brings the passive soul to mystical union” (Russell 1993, 681), dealing more specifically with the contemplative life (Tanquerey 1930, 6). McIntosh suggests that this definition was used in Western Christendom to indicate specific individual experience, notwithstanding the importance of community, because it spoke of the ultimate stages of mystical knowledge (McIntosh 2005, 456).

Ascetical Theology is effectively the study of ordinary Christian perfection (Russell 1993, 63), pertaining to people who live in a state of grace but struggle against temptations yet have a desire for perfection (the purgative stage) (Tanquerey 1930, 305), which leads to the imitation of Christ by practising positive Christian virtues (the



illuminative stage) (Tanquerey 1930, 454). The contemplative way is, in contrast, an active process by which the mind is liberated from distraction, self-occupation and prejudice to see God more clearly (McIntosh 1998, 11) with contemplation being something to which one is invited, and is thus at God's initiative, resulting in new understanding (McIntosh 1998, 12). Growth in grace and perfection is given by means of meritorious acts and the reception of the sacraments (Tanquerey 1930, 130), where a sacrament may be defined as "a visible sign of an invisible grace" or "a reality imbued with the hidden presence of God" (McBrien 1994, 9). Sacraments must be integrated with other practices, such as prayer, because the richness of the sacraments can only be truly experienced in the context of prayer (Haring 1965, 21) and repentance and the sacraments are tightly connected. Liturgy is an essential element of the Christian life, involving public worship in which ritual activities are performed (McDonagh 1990, 742), comprising, "public, communal ritual activities...signified by signs perceptible to the senses" (McDonagh 1990, 741). Thus liturgy and sacraments comprise symbolic representations, manifest through ritual, of deeper, complex concepts of God and His relationship with humanity by which the meaning and consequences of that relationship are transmitted.

A prophetic symbol is a human action proclaiming an act of God (Lawler 1987, 5) and is neither rigid nor inflexible (Cassirer 1944, 36), there always being more meaning to be discovered (Lawler 1987, 21)

requiring however a personal response to be fully effective (Lawler 1987, 12). Within Roman Catholicism a prophetic symbol is a religious symbol that participates in the reality to which it points and so the symbolic mode of knowing is through sensory perception, that is experience of meaning being found by the symbol being “lived into,” (Lawler 1987, 26). But the primary interpreter of the symbol is the receiving community (Lawler 1987, 20).

Forms of liturgical expression are important to avoid an obscured perspective of the transcendence of God (Cordeiro 1986: 191). Vatican II offers the use of indigenous liturgies, drawing upon local custom to be more accessible to worshippers, though the spiritual life is more than liturgy and includes prayer (Cordeiro 1986, 191).

Whilst scripture is of primary importance (Nowell 1994, 854) and the origin of many liturgies, it also needs to be used daily for there to be a “living love for the Scripture” (Cordeiro 1986, 190). Vatican II assists by trying to make scripture more comprehensible (Nowell 1994, 861).

As prayer is a means of addressing God in the second person ‘you’ rather than remotely in the third person, characterizing the relational nature of prayer between individual and God (Wright 1994, 766-767), experiencing it together with Scripture is a means of aiding dialogue with God (Flannery 1996, 114).

The Second Vatican Council<sup>46</sup> ‘wrestled’ with meanings of liturgy and church with “red threads” of community, freedom and person in all the debates (Novak 2002, xxxiv). Bishop Wojtyla (subsequently Pope Jean-Paul II), a significant contributor to the Council, “found in phenomenology richer terms for expressing interior dimensions of the person and community than are to be found in Aquinas.” (Novak 2002, xxxiv).

This Council sought to increase the vitality and encourage the devotional life of the faithful by giving consideration to liturgy (Flannery 1996, 117) so that life and worship might become inseparably interconnected (Cordeiro 1986, 188), facilitating God speaking to his people in the liturgy (Flannery 1996, 129). To achieve this objective the Council required priests to be “imbued with the spirit and power of the liturgy”, (Flannery 1996, 124) and for the laity to be encouraged to participate (Flannery 1996, 128-129) using local or vernacular languages (Flannery 1996, 130-131, 136; Komonchak 2003, 415) contained in the decree *Dignitatis Humanae* (Flannery 1996, 551-567), one of the most important documents of Vatican II (Konig 1986, 284). The Council considered the individual’s conscience to be fundamental in their relationship with God because the practise of religion was

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<sup>46</sup> The Second Vatican Council sat for four Autumn sessions from 1962 until 1965 (Novak 2002, xi), regarded as being an Ecumenical Council of the successors of the twelve apostles in expectation of God’s grace coming upon the meetings (Novak 2002, xi) and offered a “...*call to holiness sent out to hundreds of millions of hearts*,” (Novak 2002, xxxii).

comprised of free acts by which people sought connection with God, and that individuals aspired to be more self-directive without being subject to external pressure (Flannery 1996, 554).

The decree *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (Flannery 1996, 403-442) offered a new role for the laity as the People of God, “sharing in the salvific mission of the church” (Worlock 1986, 240), whereby union with Christ was not distinct from the laity’s ordinary life but rather that in ordinary life individuals grow closer to God through working according to God’s will (Flannery 1986, 407). The development of lay spirituality falls upon the parish life and liturgy (Worlock 1986, 243), though the characteristics can be particular, unique and changing (Flannery 1996, 409).

The Second Vatican Council noted experience as enabling people to respond actively to God’s gifts, developing understanding of the Christian message and evoking various emotional and intellectual faculties, leading to a desire to order one’s life (Flannery 1982, 572-573). The commandment, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30) is a command to experience. Dunne notes that nothing has entered history outside of someone’s experience and that “...experience is the source of meaning” (Dunne 1994, 368,369).

There is within Roman Catholicism ready acceptance of the importance and validity of experience within spiritual practices. We turn now to consider the Archdiocese within which the case study is located.

### **SECTION III**

#### **The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of St Andrews and Edinburgh**

Christianity reached Britain comparatively quickly (M'Lauchlan 1865, 42), possibly by the first half of the third century, with at least three martyrs listed during the persecution by Diocletian, including St Alban (Burleigh 1960, 5), who was the first British martyr and may have been 'Scottish' (M'Lauchlan 1865, 49). Despite disputes in relation to matters such as Easter (Macpherson 1901, 37) and tonsure (Macpherson 1901, 24; M'Lauchlan 1865, 48) by the fourth century at the latest British faith, worship and institutions were an integral part of the Catholic Church (Burleigh 1960, 5). Although the church of the Scots and Picts (lying above the Clyde/Forth basins) was not conquered by the Roman empire and so less influenced by the church operating within the empire (M'Lauchlan 1865, 51 "at no time in Scotland's history can we ignore the interaction between peoples" (Clancy and Crawford 2006, 101), as the third to ninth centuries in Scotland were a period of significant migration with ethnic groups significantly interacting with each other (Lynch 1991, 12).

St Ninian (360-432) is associated with the first recorded church in Scotland (Macpherson 1901, 5&9), this being the Church of Whitherne, also known as *candida casa*, in Galloway, Strathclyde, within the lands of the South Picts, and was founded in 397 (Wilcott 1874, 1). It comprised both monastic and secular clergy as was the pattern in the Northumbrian Church (Wilcott 1874, 1). Ninian may have been influenced by Martin of Tours, who introduced monasticism into Western Europe (M'Lauchlan 1865, 63) St Ninian's principal mission was to the South Picts whilst Columba's, one hundred and fifty years later, was to the Northern Picts (Macpherson 1901, 5). The church at Whithorn was revived in the sixth century by St Kentigern (515-612), also known as St Mungo (Macpherson 1901, 12).

Columba (521-597) (Macpherson 1901, 12) was born to the Dalriada family of Ulster, who reigned in Ireland and the West of Scotland (Macpherson 1901, 12-13) Thus the church established by St Columba derived its teaching from St Patrick and the Celtic tradition rather than the Roman form (Wilcott 1874, 1). It followed a Benedictine format of work and worship (Burleigh 1960, 16). The reigning princes of the area where Columba landed were his kinsmen (Macpherson 1901, 15), which may be of significance to the conversion of the Pictish King to Christianity (Macpherson 1901, 17, M'Lauchlan 1865, 159), upon whose conversion all the people under his jurisdiction, covering Galloway and Strathclyde, which accounted for a significant proportion

of the population of Scotland, were Christianized. This fact, combined with the southern Picts having been Christianized, left the south-east, where the Angles had once reigned but was still largely pagan, and the north (M'Lauchlan 1865, 145-146).

During the sixth to ninth centuries there were confrontations between the various church forms. King Nechtan, after being convinced of the Roman form for the calculation of Easter and style of tonsure in 717, drove out the Columban monks, replacing them with secular canons and a diocesan episcopacy with its See at Rosmarken, and permitted the Regulus of Patras (St Rule) to establish a community in 736 at Kilrymont (St Andrews) with Greek monks living by the Eastern tradition (Burleigh 1960, 31).

The Confession of Faith Ratification Act 1560 and Papal Jurisdiction Act 1560 (Scottish Parliament) effectively abolished Roman Catholic doctrine, liturgy and influence, creating a Protestant Scotland with Roman Catholicism prohibited, the mass proscribed and the authority and jurisdiction of the Pope renounced (Anson 1937, 3). The Roman Catholic Church persisted through hidden clergy covertly encouraging remaining adherents (Anson 1937, 4) until the passing of the Catholic Relief Act in 1793, which ended the official persecution of Catholics in Scotland (Anson 1937, 107).

In the nineteenth century a combination of the migration of thousands of Irish workers into the Central Lowlands and the upper

class becoming converts of the Oxford Movement resulted in the homogeneity of Scottish Catholicism disappearing within a span of fifty years, in all but depopulated rural areas (McRoberts 1979, 4), with the effect that Scottish Catholic influence was marginalised whilst the influence of Irish Catholicism remained significant.

The Irish migration to Scotland, initiated by the famines of the 1840s (McRoberts 1979, 9) led to a significant change in Catholicism in Scotland. Previously Irish migrants integrated into their local community (Ross 1979, 33), however the migration of the 1840s was marked by large numbers of migrants who retained the use of Gaelic for daily conversation (McRobert 1979, 10) settling into specific areas and forming local communities (Anson 1937, 42) which lead to ongoing poverty and a lack of housing and food within local infrastructures unable to cope (McRobert 1979, 8-9). More physically, intellectually and socially able migrants re-migrated to America and Australia, leaving those less able (McRobert 1979, 10) behind, together with Irish priests who had also migrated in order to serve the spiritual needs of the migrant communities, often fervent Irish nationalists. This led to an upsurge of Irish nationalism in Scotland, including campaigns against native Scots clergy (McRobert 1979:10-11) and the call for the appointment of Irish bishops to a new hierarchy in Scotland (McRobert 1979, 13). Compared to the austerity of the Scots, Catholicism Irish migrants brought “a less rigid expression of Faith, together with greater



toleration for human weaknesses and frailties” (Anson 1937, 79). Whilst a large concentration of Irish migrants resided in Glasgow, they also spread through Central Scotland, including Falkirk and East Lothian (McRoberts 1979, 9; Ross 1979, 33). Migrants to the Eastern District centred on Edinburgh did not integrate well, resulting in a significant change in the character of Scottish Catholicism. The Eastern district, being a predecessor of the Archdiocese of St Andrews and Edinburgh, was affected by a number of factors, including Edinburgh being the capital and the political and cultural centre of the nation (Ross 1979, 36), the Irish migration, the Highland Clearances which resulted in significant population changes (MacDonald 1979, 60-63) and the impact of the Industrial Revolution (Ross 1979, 33, McRobert 1979, 6).

The Emancipation Act of 1829 brought a significant relaxation of the discriminatory sixteenth century legislation, facilitating a profound change in the nature of Roman Catholicism in Scotland by affording a place for Catholicism in the national life, thereby providing an opportunity for security and the re-establishment of the tradition, the building of new schools and churches, the formation or introduction of religious societies, orders and institutions, all leading to the rapid development of the Catholic church and its place in Scottish society (McRobert 1979, 3). This development led to the Restoration of the Hierarchy in 1878, with an Archdiocese formed from the previous Eastern Vicariate and its See in Edinburgh and named the Archdiocese

of St Andrews and Edinburgh. Ross notes that following the Restoration of the Hierarchy there remained considerable division between native Scots and Irish, especially in areas such as West Lothian, Stirlingshire and parts of Fife, which all fell within the Archdiocese (Ross 1979, 33), though the mistrust between Lowlander and Highlander was also evident (Ross 1937, 30). The greatest need of the Roman Catholic community was to maintain unity in response to the prejudice displayed by the larger, non-catholic Scottish population, which feared and distrusted this expanding community (Ross 1979, 37). This it did by retreating within itself, providing its own schooling and social welfare, often governed by religious orders (Ross 1979, 38), libraries, savings schemes, industrial schools and other services (Ross 1979, 40). The cost of building schools and churches was largely borne by the local community (Ross 1937, 40), rather than by a centralised organisation.

The current Archdiocese covers a large geographical area, extending from the north of Fife to the Scottish borders, from the east coast of Scotland to within sixteen miles of the boundary of the City of Glasgow. As at October 2010 there were 145 priests, 113 parishes and an estimated population of 115,090 with 29,791 attending Mass on the first Sunday of November, 2009 (Archdiocese Yearbook 2011: 144).

During the period when fieldwork was undertaken the Archbishop was Keith Patrick Cardinal O'Brien, who was ordained

priest on 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1965, nominated Archbishop on 30<sup>th</sup> May 1985<sup>47</sup> and ordained in Edinburgh on 5<sup>th</sup> August 1985<sup>48</sup>. Cardinal O'Brien was created cardinal on 21<sup>st</sup> October 1985<sup>49</sup> by Pope John Paul II.

In anticipation of his resigning on his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday,<sup>50</sup> Cardinal O'Brien's resignation was accepted *nunc pro tunc* by Pope Benedict XVI on 13<sup>th</sup> November 2012 and definitively accepted on 25<sup>th</sup> February 2013.

The criteria for consideration for the appointment of a bishop are contained in Canon 378. The Archbishop of the Archdiocese is a Diocesan bishop<sup>51</sup> and a member of the Bishops' Conference of Scotland<sup>52</sup>. As a bishop, powers to sanctify<sup>53</sup>, teach<sup>54</sup> and govern<sup>55</sup> are conferred upon him, in addition to all necessary powers for the exercise of his pastoral function<sup>56</sup>. As metropolitan of the province, comprising the Archdiocese and suffragan dioceses, he exercises oversight over the entire province<sup>57</sup>.

Monsignor Leo Cushley was subsequently appointed Archbishop. His installation took place on 21<sup>st</sup> September 2013.

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<sup>47</sup> Appointment is by the Pope in terms of The Code of Canon Law, Canon 377.

<sup>48</sup> Ordination must be within 3 months of receipt of the apostolic letter and before taking office - Canon 379.

<sup>49</sup> The Pope freely appoints cardinals - Canon 351.

<sup>50</sup> Canon 401.

<sup>51</sup> Canon 376.

<sup>52</sup> Canon 450.

<sup>53</sup> Canon 387.

<sup>54</sup> Canon 388.

<sup>55</sup> Canon 391.

<sup>56</sup> Canon 381.

<sup>57</sup> Canon 435-436.

We move now to the narratives of the participants in this case study, for which the foregoing has offered a context.



## **Chapter 4**

### **Narratives**

#### **Introduction**

The previous chapter sought to introduce aspects of Christian spirituality, Roman Catholicism and the Archdiocese of St Andrews and Edinburgh as a means of providing a context for the case study. This chapter contains the narratives of the participants and begins with a very brief account of the specific method aspects, the general method being discussed in Chapter 10. The chapter is therefore divided into two parts, covering each of these objectives.

In the following chapter we will apply the first stage of hermeneutic phenomenological enquiry to the original transcripts by preparing narratives which whilst remaining faithful to the transcripts that follow, in order that this may offer fresh insight into elements that appear significant to the spirituality of each participant, affording an opportunity for others to identify, find resonance and similarity with the experiences described and which may enable them to find new understandings and meanings of their own experiences.

The methodological approach seeks to present phenomena under enquiry, identifying significant characteristics from which

meaning and understanding may be gained through an interpretative approach.

## **Part One**

### **Method Verification**

The approach outlined in Chapter 10 was followed and in particular ethical consent was obtained from the University of St Andrews School of Divinity Ethics Committee and from the Archbishop of the Archdiocese of St Andrews and Edinburgh.

Potential participants were introduced by contacts who were either Roman Catholic priests or members of religious communities. All were above the age of eighteen years, none were vulnerable adults and all lived within the Archdiocese. In addition they were all actively involved and connected to a parish or religious community. Interested persons were firstly given an information sheet and, if they wished to proceed, a consent form was issued for completion. On one occasion, after perusing the information sheet, a prospective participant declined to be involved on the basis that they were prepared to discuss issues of spirituality but not personal matters or experiences, which demonstrates that the consent process worked effectively.

Twenty-five interviews were conducted, of which five have been selected for further consideration based on participants offering different perspectives of spiritual practice and experience. The

participants selected comprised a lay male, a lay female, a female religious, a male religious who was also a priest and a female who had converted to Roman Catholicism, having previously been part of another denomination.

In some instances the participant shared interesting points after the recorder had been switched off. These comments were not included in this case study. The interview digital files were delivered to a trusted transcriber who transcribed the voice files into the narratives, returning same by email.

### **Researcher's Position and Reflexivity**

The researcher in this project was a mature, married male with a young son, a practising lawyer, a professing Christian and a member of the Church of Scotland, a reformed denomination in which practices pertaining to Mary, the Saints, aspects of liturgy and various traditions are unfamiliar. Prior to participating in this work the researcher had had superficial contact with the Roman Catholic Church and members of Roman Catholic communities, which contact had been largely restricted to ecumenical or non-religious events and had, during the course and independent of the project, undertaken the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises under the direction of a non-Roman Catholic spiritual director. The researcher's understanding, knowledge and



experience of Roman Catholicism and especially Roman Catholicism within the central/eastern portion of Scotland was therefore limited.

Although largely unfamiliar with much of Roman Catholic theology or practice, he endeavoured to be aware of these unfamiliarities and any inherent bias that may arise due to a lack of understanding or appreciation of various dimensions of Roman Catholicism or the possible bias of coming from a reformed tradition. However the advantage of researcher as outsider was in not bringing particular views or prejudices about the theology or practice of Roman Catholicism or associated contemporary political, theological or social issues.

The focus of this study was Spirituality, emphasising experience rather than catechism, and not exploring or critiquing theories or theologies associated with spiritual matters. Rather it sought a deeper understanding of how active members within Roman Catholicism, and especially the Archdiocese, understood the term and its impact on their lives. The researcher was sympathetic to the notion of spirituality, especially within a Christian context, and sought a greater understanding of what the term and the practices associated therewith meant to 'ordinary' people and the means of giving expression thereto.

We now proceed to the participants narratives.

## **Part Two**

### **Narratives: Individual stories**

#### **Participant 5**

Participant 5 was a married, middle-aged female with adult children, at least one of whom was in full-time education. She resided in a comfortable home within a suburban setting where she had lived for a number of years. She was welcoming and hospitable to the interviewer. A close relative had died in the months prior to the interview and she provided care for another elderly relative. She was an active lay member of the local Roman Catholic congregation and was involved in activities within the parish, including aspects of adult faith formation.

Describing herself as a “cradle catholic”, Participant 5 aligned herself closely with Roman Catholicism from a perspective of her family’s association, both from having been encouraged by her parents and encouraging her own children, her Catholicism being “...what defines me and I think it’s what defines our family.” She spoke fondly of her family’s roots in Ireland, and her continued affiliation thereto, despite several intervening generations having lived entirely within Scotland. She conveyed a strong sense of connectedness with the Church, founded in part in her family’s association therewith. She considered it a “duty to pass on my faith and my spirituality” and in this

context it was apparent that the term “faith” was restricted to Roman Catholicism. Her identification with Roman Catholicism was supranational in that she did not consider herself to be Scottish, though born in Scotland and having lived in Scotland, rather considering race and religion as the same and identifying more with being Roman Catholic than Scottish:

“I never feel any sense of belonging to Scotland...in the same sense that Jewish people see their self, their religion and their race as more or less the same and I think that my religion is truly [my] universal soul.”

The Roman Catholic Church provided her with practical aspects for religious observance, such as mass, and a place of safety and security through what she perceived to be both a reliable knowledge basis and a wider support system. The Church provided access to “great brains” and a structure which “...underpins my whole life...”, allowing her to be “absolutely certain that I’m following that true path.” A local priest had been involved with her family through a recent bereavement and also in a family celebration, during which he had been encouraging the family’s engagement with the Church, including presiding over a private Mass to mark that celebration. The kindness and support offered by the Church would appear to strengthen the

relationship between the family members individually, the family as a unit and the Church, and in this context the involvement of the Church in the life of the family can be seen to be highly significant.

She described a sense of deep spirituality from members of religious communities which enriched her life, giving considerable encouragement and inspiration. Gestures of goodwill by one such community gave her both a sense of support at the time and an enduring sense of support. In particular she spoke of specific occasions of close contact with members of that community from which she felt there was, "...like a big circle of spirituality surrounding us..." However she also described a close family connection with this particular community spanning a number of generations, so this longstanding rapport may be a significant origin for the affection and receptivity between participant and community. Nevertheless she felt this community made a contribution towards her spiritual development. The network of priests was very important to her, both of local priests, who provided support and encouragement and also the opportunity to approach other priests was for her valuable and life enhancing. Additionally, the global dimension of the Church provided a gateway through which parishes, whether local or worldwide, could be easily accessed and where she felt able to participate and be accepted on an equal level with others. Notions of equality arose for this participant in being able to meet with others, even strangers and "...meet people on

the same level...", this sense offering her community. This was exemplified by her being able to visit new parishes, with phrases such as, "...don't have to explain yourself," or "...nobody questioning why I'm there..." suggesting ideas of hospitality, welcome, acceptance and community.

The variety of liturgical acts attended by Participant 5 extended beyond weekly attendance at Mass to include Benediction, Novenas and Stations of the Cross. She was often able to attend Mass daily. These activities, some of which may be regarded as devotional rather than spiritual, facilitated focusing on central aspects of the participant's faith within the context of the Church's teachings, from which she drew strength, support and an opportunity for active participation in the life of the Church, drawing her closer within that community.

Participation in the life of the Church provided a deep sense of belonging, orientation and support to the participant whilst still affording flexibility to express and deepen her faith and spiritual life within her context, including dealing with family life and other practicalities. She acknowledged that when her family were young it had been more difficult to participate but noted "...depending on what rhythm I'm in I attend different things..." suggesting a flexibility and "rhythm", which for her resonates as important because though her children were adults she provided considerable care for an elderly relative, further suggesting a subsisting supportive matrix which, despite the variety of

different circumstances arising during life, still recognized and enabled the development of her spiritual life.

Participant 5 expressed difficulty in defining the term 'spirituality' but said it was about, "...growing in faith and knowledge of God...", "about the ability to see beyond this and this life here" and "...is the return you get from God." She appeared to have more of a sense of what spirituality was about than knowledge as a distinct subject but was clear that one could be spiritual without being religious, though for her spirituality followed on from faith which was in turn a gift from God, so both were clearly and mutually dependent and intertwined: "...and I would like to see our faith continue and it's only going to do that if my spirituality grows..."

The activities most important to her for spiritual vitality and growth were largely experiential: attendance at Mass and other liturgy and informal discussions with others. She found frequent participation at Mass necessary for her well-being and a recurring, central aspect of her spirituality, amongst its benefits being an enhanced sense of identity, community and belonging. She considered it as a means of grace, this grace being, "intensified," at certain times, such as weddings and funerals, with First Communions and the Easter Liturgies being of particular significance. Her earlier bereavement may however have also been a factor in the participant's desire to attend Mass so frequently, providing a sense of comfort and connection. Not only did

Participant 5 feel a need to attend Mass, but to do so prior to the Consecration, to be able to participate in the Eucharist, indicating that participation was important to her and Mass was both an act of worship and a means of grace: “sometimes see Mass as going to a kind of oasis...” The importance to her of participation rather than passive acceptance suggests reciprocity and duality within the Rite, which was enriching for her. Whilst feelings on a day-to-day basis changed, sometimes with little awareness of what was going on around, she found that more frequent attendance for extended periods lead to heightened levels of awareness, and thus were possibility indicative of greater active participation. Her familiarity with liturgies gained through regular, frequent participation appears to have facilitated openness within the ritual, providing the participant with an opportunity for spiritual growth. The nature of the liturgy of the Mass was itself helpful for her: “Strictures of it [the Mass] are like seasons.” This familiarity appears to provide the participant with a context within which she was able to become more aware of God’s presence and its meaning for her.

Although not elaborated on, Participant 5 mentioned regular attendance at Benediction, Novenas and Stations of the Cross as helpful in spiritual development, noting especially that the structure of the observances helped her grow in faith. The Stations of the Cross were stated as being beneficial to her spiritual formation and development.

In considering an experience of particular significance, Participant 5 was drawn to an Easter service involving her son, during which the congregation moved into and out of the sanctuary, describing darkness and light, the re-decoration of the sanctuary and the renewing and lighting of altar candles, leading to that which stood out most strongly for her, a deep sense of, "...who we are and where we are, in heaven and earth, because the Alpha and Omega is the whole essence of our faith."

She observed that speaking with others about faith and spirituality, at home and at work, was natural, open and offered insights for contemplation during Mass. In one instance she recalled comments by a friend whilst watching a football game that led her to consider more deeply the words of the Consecration. The interaction and openness with friends and family that permitted talking about faith and spiritual issues in an open and casual way was important because it refreshed the sense of wonder: "Spirituality is enhanced by people talking about it or by practicing your faith regularly and varied." The opportunity for the priest to act in a way that appears to her as being a friend as well as a priest enabled her to more fully appreciate the ongoing and inexhaustible nature of spirituality: "...there is much more."

In considering the term 'spirituality', Participant 5 thought that it followed on from faith. The practice of a religion was not necessary for spiritual growth, though there needed to be spiritual growth to have



growth in faith. Her spiritual life found meaning through the church but was shared with others, both within the family and with friends. The structures of the church, the priests, accessibility of congregations, the Roman Catholic community, the doctrine and hierarchy of the Church, liturgies (especially the Mass), all brought vitality to her life and a sustenance to her spiritual well-being. She accepted the teachings of the Church, lived by her doctrinal requirements and, in accordance with the application of those teachings to her personally. Internalization she described in terms of being more attracted to spiritual awareness as she grew older, of a greater sense of there always being something more, all leading to an underpinning of the whole of her life, enabling her to state it was "...crucial to my life..." and to describe the transcendental nature of spirituality: "...the effort's not coming from you, it's within you...". In relation to grace and of the work of the Holy Spirit she said, "Grace is the strength you get from the Holy Spirit." For her, the spiritual life was an on-going process, "...definitely progressive..." "...spirituality is like that, there's always something else..."

Participant 5 felt that spirituality brought her a sense of freedom, "...frees me up..." ; of peace "...a lot of peace...", providing her with a sense of herself and her place in the world and not needing to worry, "...oh it'll sort itself out and like its God's plan," and, "...on the day-to-day basis you get grace..." Importantly she stated, "My spirituality

frees me up. It liberates me from worry.” This concept of God being closely involved and providing for her needs was enhanced by her view of God’s actions for her personally:

“...unfolding of God’s plan...there is a greater plan and it unwinds and unravels...look back on things and ... well, that happened because of that and it’s hard at the time but it allowed me to do this or that differently or whatever, so I never worry about anything.”

Whilst these internal aspects of spiritual formation were highly significant for Participant 5, there also arose outward manifestations. She spoke of being involved in adult faith formation. During a recent bereavement she felt that it was through grace and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, to which she was more receptive because of her developing spiritually, that she was more able to cope than she would otherwise.

She considered that spirituality was, “...influential in my daily life because everybody at my work knows who I am, they know what I am,” and considered herself to be “...too mouthy because it was a sin by omission not to stand up for someone.” She often dedicated her participation in Mass to someone, believing that this would be of benefit to them. She viewed spiritual development as a means to find peace,

freedom and harmony with neighbour, the world and herself, especially being freed from materialistic pressures of contemporary society, inspiring her towards a deeper sense of there being a further, liberating, dimension:

“And it’s actually quite liberating when you think that, you know, that all things are passing and if your spirituality’s at a level whereby everything else falls away, well, what a wonderful feeling.”

### **Participant 9**

Participant 9 was a middle-aged married man, living with his wife in an urban setting for a number of years, who had adult children. The house was comfortably furnished and he was welcoming and hospitable to the interviewer. He described himself as being financially ‘fairly secure’ and had had a significant change of career a few years previously. He was actively involved in his local parish church, wider activities within the Archdiocese and within a Charismatic Movement.

He described little about his family, instead situating himself within a context of practical daily relationship with Christ, with much of his thought self-reflective, seeking to be open to Christ and be changed as God called him rather than seeking to promote his own views. For example, in considering problems in relationships with priests he

commented, "...let God judge how good a priest is...I just focus on myself, changing me." He described his beliefs as being, "quite strong," and in relation to faith said that he "definitely believe[s] in Jesus...came to save me...don't mean in an arrogant way but I think it's a personalized thing," as well as in the Catholic Church and in the Last Supper, expressing specifically, "...do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22: 19).

Central to Participant 9 was his direct relationship with God, the depth of which seemed to have been deepened considerably following the Holy Spirit Weekend of an Alpha course after which he felt moved to, "do things in our own parish." A Charismatic Movement which he regularly attended had also had a profound influence upon him. The relationship with God was, for him, a priority, even over the Church, but he said the church, "...doesn't have all the answers...but it still worships in a way that is honouring the Lord." For him, the Church assisted in the development of that relationship, rather than as a mediator.

He spoke of God's direct involvement in his life on a number of occasions - "I do believe there's a lot of things that God's done in my life" - acknowledging that often he did not know or recognize the purpose of certain events or choices he had made until much later. But he was aware that faith was a timeline, very short for human life and long for God, and so accepted that God's plans could be quite different

from his own expectations. By experience he knew that the best outcomes were achieved by living life faithfully with God, even if this was painful at the time. During such times his reaction was to “batten the hatches down...try to keep as close to the Lord as I can,” through prayer and the Eucharist. Drawing a comparison with nature, he saw rhythms in life and faith which were necessary, to “build a nest” in the good times so as to be prepared for the more difficult times.

Prayer was central to most aspects of his life and access to God was only through Christ - “...the only way I can contact him is through prayer and worshipping” - to which he turned daily and in times of crisis. It was important to him because if faith was affected by ‘daily living’ activities then it was affected by very short term events and prayer helped to keep him “on an even keel”. Through regular prayer he felt, “I probably trust Him now more than I ever did in my life”, allowing him on occasions when he didn’t understand events to “really have to cling on tight to the Lord.”

The Church was significant to Participant 9 - “I basically love the Church” - one reason being because it held mystery:

“I love the mystery of the church...it doesn’t have all the answers itself to things but it still worships in a way that is honouring to the Lord...accept in this life there’s certain things we’ll never know or understand.”

He felt positively about the notion of the Church as “imperfect”, not having answers to everything, and accepted there were difficulties “...it’s got a lot of faults”, both administratively and relationally, such as between parishioners and priest. To him it demonstrated weakness, which offered opportunity for acceptance and welcoming and that the way in which the Church was led and directed was for its leaders and not for him to judge, question or reject, stating, “...It’s God’s church, it’s not a human thing.” God having ordained Peter to be the first pope, he felt he had neither the right to dissent from or form his own church.

The Roman Catholic Community offered Participant 9 a “...good support, good network of people” including a parish in which he could be actively involved, a charismatic movement which appealed to him, friendship and a structure, without requiring detailed theological knowledge for living: “I don’t need to understand it.” The charismatic movement provided a place and regular time to meet with others which he found uplifting, offering times of grace and confirmation. In particular, this movement offered an environment in which he felt more able to express himself compared to the parish setting and was particularly influential on his spiritual development and growth, suggesting that this was due to being amongst others with similar preferences. Means of expression was important to him, even if he found it difficult to ‘get on’ with a person at a relational level. Together

these indicate that different settings provided a deeper experience and, for him, that this variety is more helpful. He spoke of a perceived fear within church communities of involvement leading to an inescapable commitment for years, yet felt where the commitment was enjoyable and done “through the love of the Lord” then it was not burdensome, implying his view that outward action in response to God, rather than exclusively inner development, was a constituent of the spiritual life.

For Participant 9 spirituality involved an awareness of God’s presence, found most strongly in the Eucharist, the bible and other people. Community was important because it was in the interaction with others, within the bond of community that God spoke to him. He described a particular event in which a person advised him to read a particular verse at a particular time and place and on doing so he changed his career as he clearly felt God’s call.

This participant felt that devotional elements helped him develop a closer relationship with God. The Rosary in particular was important, useful and especially significant because of its accessibility, not only during formal worship but in small groups. He met others as part of a group on Sunday evenings to pray the Rosary, including in his home, and felt this to be important preparation at the beginning of a new week. The numbers gathering varied between three and eight.

His wife and he prayed together each morning and he also prayed the St Michael Prayer for protection, because he felt both

protected and in need of protection in his professional life. The support of spouses praying together regularly appeared to be natural and important to him.

Worship of many forms was helpful. Mass, gatherings to sing and pray and Bible readings were important, however for Participant 9 the most important element was the Eucharist which, if possible, he would attend daily because “the Eucharist helps me.” The idea of his sins being washed away, being strengthened and protected were very strongly associated with the Eucharist which he felt was “the most powerful thing I can get from the Lord” and at which he believed he was effectively present at the Last Supper with Jesus, receiving it from Him. It was for him both mysterious and powerful, constituting a spiritual grace which he experienced as freeing and deeply relational with Jesus: “worshipping the Lord should be a joyful experience.”

In considering the Church, he was drawn to the mystery associated with some of its teaching, expecting not to be able to understand all its teachings, with his adherence to the Church being sufficient to allow him to accept these teachings. However in considering his religious beliefs, his non-understanding also arose, because he could only understand those beliefs by personalizing them through his own experiences: “Because it’s beyond my understanding...I can only personalize it from my own experience...what the Holy Spirit has done for me.” It appears that for



him the institution assists in facilitating settings in which such experiences occur and can be understood.

Theology was for him “the theory behind it” though faith and theology were markedly different, it being possible to have “...great knowledge of the bible and have a very low faith.” Theology was simultaneously good and needed to be handled with some caution “...you’ve got to guard against it a little bit because you are trying to understand...”

Grace was frequently mentioned, the participant noting “I’m starting to learn in life that you do get gifts from the Lord that you have not earned” and “Grace is a divine thing.” He held that graces could occur without notice and in unexpected circumstances, often finding out later why he may have received a grace, acts of grace occurring at good and more difficult times. He felt it was important to maintain a strong faith and acknowledge the gifts by grace, because by not appreciating them, tribulations of life could be even more oppressive. He associated gifts of grace with senses of “uplifting” and “overwhelming joy.”

Interestingly he considered the personal task of discerning God’s calling as important and generally as being “...something that’ll be different from what you think”, so it was important to maintain awareness both of God and separately of God’s acting in the

relationship between God and him, in order to recognize occasions of grace rather than attribute the phenomenon to himself or others.

About spirituality he commented, “Spirituality is a gift. You’ve got to seek it and once you seek it God will guide you”, though he had difficulty defining the term, saying it was easier to “sense it”, though it encompassed ideas of profundity, its being ‘not-human’ and causing one to think deeply about oneself whereas religion was, “seeking desires of your heart, spiritual needs that you have...” He did not differentiate between the notions of awareness and receptiveness, rather conveying the common thread of God’s constant presence and a ‘tapping in’ which required receptivity. He also described spirituality as “almost like a beacon, like very much a lighthouse”, carrying images of shining out and needing to be seen to be effective. To him, God does not compel but offers guidance, with the individual determining how, and if, to proceed.

He highlighted dynamics between pride and humility where pride was capable of blocking one’s hearing and receiving God’s call, emphasising the need to work at removing pride in order to “...let God’s spirituality come into it...,” which he described as a healing process and the acceptance of which he associated with grace. He felt the acceptance of charity, as well as giving, was part of this dynamic and that often people more readily gave than were able or willing to accept.

Spirituality was an element of humanity, not only within Roman Catholicism or Christianity but widely: "...there's a human need for spirituality, it's in us...whether we choose to suppress it or not" and that "spirituality makes us the person we are, it makes us a better all-round person", apprehending an apparently insatiable need within contemporary society for something more.

For this participant, people are looking beyond the everyday things for signs or wonders or guidance and that need is more present now than ever before. Whilst observing people are "looking for spirituality in different places" he cautioned that there may be malevolent forces at work and so care was required in all aspects of discernment, even where the Bible was being quoted. The most effective means of discernment was to pray.

He felt, "Spirituality is always a call to change" and if there was not change then it was because change was being resisted. His career changing experience was for him an example of the spiritual dimension of life in action and the working of God through another and the Bible, of the need for prayer and discernment, of the call being something unexpected and profound, requiring faith and commitment even into something previously unknown. This call was optional, there was no demand by God, but he was given a choice and left to decide how to proceed, with his decision being founded in trust and manifest in action. This experience had given him more confidence, stating "so if the Lord

says to me to go and do something now I would do it even though I don't understand why and it might not even make sense to me." He connected this trust to an increased awareness of the Holy Spirit.

Participant 9 recognised the progressive nature of the spiritual life during which there were gradual changes and that God did not expect sudden change. He was also aware of the need to "wean yourself off" habits that were detrimental and that this was in accordance with God's will: "God's a practical person". Forgiveness was always available but it was not an excuse to continue in a destructive lifestyle and it was difficult to seek forgiveness whilst not being prepared to attempt any change to such a lifestyle.

The outward manifestation of spirituality for this participant was characterized by factors such as an increased trust in God, leadership and active participation, becoming involved in youth activities which offered opportunities to talk informally about his faith, and in liturgical and devotional practices.

### **Participant 10**

Participant 10 was a single female, with an adult family, living alone in a comfortable home in a suburban town and had been a single mother whilst raising her family. She was in contact with other family members, including her mother. She described having been involved in a number of Christian denominations, including ordained ministry, prior

to her conversion to Roman Catholicism and continued to be actively involved in church-related work. She did not dwell on her family other than in the context of her life story and its interaction with spirituality.

She acknowledged the advantage of having experienced differing approaches from various denominational practices in her developing relationship with God, from which she felt she was only able to settle within the Roman Catholic tradition because, whilst eager to highlight the generosity and care of the other denominations with which she had been involved and which had enriched her life and relationship with God, giving opportunities to explore that relationship, constant questioning had led her to the conviction that she could only sustain a dynamic life within Roman Catholicism: "I was learning about myself and about my relationship with God....gradually I wasn't able to really to sustain the situation I was in and realized that the Catholic Church was where I really belonged," which she attributed to being part of "...the big church, the original church" and it was only within this Church that she could, "...hold it all together...". She felt it was a place where, "....there is room for a lot of people with a lot of different opinions", which was significant for her because of "the whole idea of unity being so important..." and "the idea of the whole of creation...all people united, is really important to me." Being comfortable within Roman Catholicism gave her a sense of being able to be more ecumenical and she connected a person's suggestion she was "an

awful lot nicer” as a Roman Catholic with her feeling more secure, which also provided her with a sense of freedom. She narrated having been homeless with a young family, of being welcomed into a denomination that encouraged her development within its ministry as well as subsequently in other denominations, resulting in considering herself to have an open and ecumenical perspective. She noted that in her experience there was a same-ness about the problems faced within different forms of organized religion.

Her experience of monastic traditions, having been involved in or worked with same, was of offering a sense of freedom and being largely unencumbered by Church rules in the way a parish was, though she emphasized the parish was the foundation of the Church, without which there would be no priests, nuns or monks. “Parishes are where people live, are born and work.”

She considered her beliefs to be liberal and, within reason, it didn’t really matter what was believed: “I have this typical liberal view of ‘it doesn’t matter what I believe about this, that or the other’”, although having an understanding of what was believed was important, both intellectually and spiritually, through providing a means of recognizing gifts, graces and meetings with God, by which markers were laid in the spiritual life which, though not spoken, were undeniable and ultimately effected change in the individual. She felt that circumstances which did not accord with beliefs prevented a person from being true to

themselves, concluding that a decision should be taken based not only on integrity but on one's whole experience. She was clear there was a difference between 'feeling' and 'knowing': for her spirituality was absolutely about knowing and, "not really about feelings."

She stated, "I go to Mass every day" and felt this was important because, "its meeting with God ...it's not just about what I do because He's coming to me...it's a meeting." So Mass was the active interaction of two parties, God and the individual, which was significant and, for her, enriching. To her the closure of the Mass was not the end of the relationship but rather Jesus being taken out into her daily living.

She found various devotional and spiritual practices helpful, particularly the Divine Office, recalling attending the Office of Readings at 3am in a monastery with which she had a connection, whilst working during the day. She commented that being in a large abbey church with monks and a few others at 3am "really helped a lot," and, "gave me a reason.... a kind of slowing down". In following the set Office she felt, "...means you are part of the whole of the Church." Praying at 3am felt important work because "...it's a time when people are at their lowest so you're kind of praying for them. I mean, they can't pray for themselves", and by extension, "prayer is also sharing the sufferings of others."

Contemplative prayer, especially for her *lectio divina*, was for her not only a means of praying with Scripture but of meeting with God and

developing a commitment in acknowledgement of being a neighbour to others. Bible reading helped her spirituality by highlighting how much she did not know and facilitated learning more.

She prayed the Rosary on her own and would also try and do so at the local church weekly because it helped her feel part of the prayer life of the Church, which for her was about sharing.

She differentiated between 'faith' as being either a religion or, in pertaining to belief, involving giving of one's life to God and linked to initiation rites which she felt were there, "so that we know that we have taken it on board ourselves," and, "not just been born into it." To her, theology was the study and analysis of God, whilst religion was the "scheme of things", providing a framework by which one differentiates 'good' from 'bad' and spirituality was "...our knowledge of God and our relationship with God..." and "a very important and necessary part of our whole being and certainly our Christian life."

She commented that there were many within various denominations who would "deny the spiritual", describing such a view as "very strange" and associating it with those "...that say you can't have a hotline to God."

Having been involved with a variety of denominations, she felt that Roman Catholicism could uniquely hold differing theological propositions in unity, which was fundamentally important to her, releasing her to be ecumenical. She expressed a view that in joining



the Roman Catholic Church as an adult from other denominations, she had a greater awareness of the richness and diversity of its teaching compared to those born into the tradition.

Spirituality was an important element in her life and she held tightly to the concept throughout the interview. She noted, “I first realised my relationship to God when I had my first child”. Thereafter it was about a journey of coming closer to God. She described some significant experiences in her life to illustrate this journey metaphor, including her acceptance of Christ, which she described as an “evangelical conversion”, by which she meant that she came to a deep and personal awareness that Jesus had died for her and was “...a kind of total life-changing conversion.” She described a subsequent experience of becoming a Roman Catholic, being not so much a changing of mind as a progression from “wishy washy, not sure” to “oh yes, I do know now” and, in emphasizing her view that spiritual development was a journey, stated:

“It’s definitely a journey...isn’t that our personalities change...whole areas that change in our lives because of our spiritual life and the big one is healing...this whole business of forgiveness...not something we actually do...it’s almost as if a little bit of more light comes into the soul and a bit of the darkness

goes and the good news is that it never comes back again, because our spirituality, it just kind of moves on.”

Notwithstanding the personal dimension of spirituality, she noted, “I think the whole idea of spirituality is far more than personal fulfilment...our spirituality is ultimately for others,” highlighting recurring themes of acceptance, relationship with God and community in the participant’s understanding of spirituality.

In the wider community she believed many were arrested by spirituality though only when significant events occurred and “...people are much more spiritual than we give them credit for...,” with many of the deep practical issues faced by people not really having changed over the centuries but merely appearing with different veneers.

Amongst denominations she felt that the expression of spirituality varied and this was a good thing. As examples she noted in Methodism there was singing, in the Carmelite tradition there was an emphasis on community, in Cistercian spirituality there was a sense of denial of oneself, directly related to the loving of neighbours and friends. She thought that issues raised in Presbyterian settings were very similar to those in Roman Catholic parishes and that, whilst there were differences in the modes of practice, essentially they attempted to share the same objective, a closer relationship with God, but care was

required as, "...if we're not careful the method can become more important than where we're trying to get to."

Monasteries, she felt, provided good examples, because they encouraged friendships, within and beyond, the community, thereby providing a practical illustration of Jesus as friend and companion. They were also important as places where people could go and just be accepted.

In considering characteristics of spirituality, this participant highlighted humility and total dependence on God. She expressed that "spirituality is about becoming...less of me and my ego, what I want and what God wants", relating to notions of trust and patience and that all forms of spirituality were for her "a freedom from all the things that tie us down...But it is true of all spirituality that we find things that are helpful but they are not the things themselves, it [is] like [a] kind of... it's a help to go through it." She recalled how in her journey various denominations had helped her before amicably allowing her to move on, despite the costs involved and investments they had made in her. She noted that, "the most important spirituality is letting go."

Essentially she seemed to view spirituality in terms of communities and relationship with God, motivated by a sense of finding God in or for others. Supporting this, she said, "I now sort of see God in other people whoever they are and that is probably the most helpful thing," and "we all need to learn a lot of humility." From this can be

sensed a putting aside of oneself and, in a humble approach, interacting with others in whom God can be met:

“The point of spirituality is that deep knowledge that whatever you are feeling it’s not actually the be-all and end-all of everything...there is something which actually holds you, literally holds you. God just holds you and you just know.”

#### **Participant 14**

Participant 14 was a female member of a religious order with which she had been associated since the age of eighteen and she expressed that she had been “very happy” in her vocation. She had family and strong connections with Ireland and was neither born nor raised within the Archdiocese but had lived within its boundaries for a considerable time.

She described her mother as having a strong Roman Catholic faith which was influential during her childhood and adolescence, including her attending Mass daily and Benediction on a regular basis. She lived with her family in Ireland in cramped accommodation prior to moving to England then Scotland. She had lived in Ireland and England before settling in Scotland. She described herself as having “quite a tempestuous nature.”

The participant stated she was, "...very happy as a Catholic" even although there had been "big struggles." The church had provided the structure around which she understood the world and her religious beliefs were, "...what I have learned through the Catholic Church" and living within a religious community.

Being unified with the whole church was very important to her, especially through Mass but also the Divine Office. She particularly commented that praying with others the worldwide Prayer of the Church was important because it was largely scripturally based. From it she drew an awareness of "...being united with the whole Church" and felt "...we are all so interconnected that we're representing the whole human race when we're praying..." For her, there was a much greater degree of interaction and relationship on the spiritual level: "We're all intimately united with one another."

The Roman Catholic concept of sin and hell were very strong and foreboding; as a child she described worrying, going to sleep, that if she died during the night she would go to hell, but "the picture of the sacred heart ...balanced it." Her beliefs were those she had learned through the Church and described same in terms of the Creed, but in her own way, particularly Jesus as the second person of the Trinity, with both human and divine nature, which she believed, "...with all my heart, not just because I learned it by rote, but because I know it in my bones and He suffered and died for us, for our redemption." She

considered theology to be knowledge about God whereas faith was knowledge of God, illustrating her point by comparing the reading books around her, that knowledge of them would imply knowing facts about her, "...but you wouldn't know me." She held Jesus as a gift and through Him "...we're given faith, hope and love." The life of St Thérèse de Lisieux had had a profound influence on her, describing being drawn to imitate her life and how as a child she would be drawn away from 'naughty behaviour' through a desire to be like Thérèse. She believed that each person was made unique, with a unique capacity for love, because, "...each one of us can love Him in a way that nobody else ever has or ever will."

Mary, the mother of Jesus, was very important to her, stating "...Our Lady...plays a very important part in my life" and describing, for her, Mary as very motherly, suggesting a direct relationship. She held that although Christ was the one mediator Mary had, "...an extraordinary share in that mediation", feeling as if in some way, "she's my mother." To her Mary was "...the most motherly mother, the most loving, the most tender and the most understanding", and of not being a "snob" and "...she's not judgmental..."

Whilst attending Mass with her family during childhood she felt a sense of holiness about the ceremony and though it was the Tridentine Mass her mother explained what was happening in order that she could understand the Latin Liturgy. She understood and explained the Mass

in terms of being the supreme act of worship, at which the Son of God made a sacrifice once for all, her understanding of which was that all were present at Calvary as one incident in a form of unification of time and space so that, "...it doesn't matter how distracted we are or how sleepy or anything, we are still there." She sought to understand the pain and suffering of crucifixion as a means of understanding the depth of Christ's love for her and an indication of the measure of the love of God for each one as an individual. She also commented, "The lowly are exalted, the humble are exalted."

She told of how as a child Benediction "...really did impress me very deeply", describing the "...Real Presence of Jesus in the form of the host.....inside a monstrance...to show us Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament", and that "I felt the sacredness, the holiness, that this was something completely out of this world, completely spiritual if you like..." She also expressed how reciting the Rosary helped her because, to her, it was like the liturgical year in miniature, rhythmic and peaceful. Since her childhood, the image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus had been a significant influence from which she felt a great sense of being both loved and understood by Jesus and of being called to love Him, with a desire to do so. She described how her experience of this image was very similar to that of Benediction.

For her 'religion' pertained to the outward expression of faith, such as church attendance, saying of prayers, but these activities could

also be conducted without faith and would then be religiosity. She described her faith as “....the person of Jesus” and that she was “...hopefully following in His footsteps” with the result that she “... [didn’t] think of faith as other than Him...”, which she expressed by “... getting up in the morning when I feel like staying in bed”, by remaining within a religious community and committing herself to it each day and by trying to do the will of Jesus, which was not without its difficulties. Her faith called for tolerance and to refrain from judgment which, for her, was derived from Jesus teaching not to judge, and operated in daily activities because it was there that opportunities arose to respond to Jesus’ love.

Although she did not like the term ‘spirituality’, understanding it in terms of “the inner dimension”, it was different from intellect and emotions, though working with them. She preferred terms such as faith and love because ‘spirituality’ could carry connotations of activities that were “quite unchristian” or “it could even be something where God doesn’t really enter into it, so I find that a bit too general.”

Interestingly, in considering her childhood and describing herself during the period as a late teenager as “enjoying life”, she recalled that one of her friends, considered to be more “prim and proper”, decided to live with a partner, not marry and leave the Church, which had made her feel more drawn to a religious life rather than a secular one, though the (non-religious) community of which she was part at that time was



under considerable secular influences in which she actively participated. For her this was significant, because it was "...an important part of the journey." The inner conviction of a religious life grew stronger in this environment with the "...Holy Spirit just making me aware" which she attributed to a "...dissatisfaction with everything, enjoying myself thoroughly but knowing this isn't what's it's all about."

During her religious life the participant described having suffered a period of ill-health, noting she went through a "...very bad time" but it had "...no effect on my relationship with God" and she considered it to be "...just life; it's just the mystery of the cross, our human condition."

Characteristics of spirituality, for her, included love for Jesus, prayer and the sacraments. Specifically she noted it would involve a "need to spend time alone with God", emphasizing "...the effort to make that time." In addition practices like contemplative prayer, prayers of the Church and the Divine Office were important to follow, but most important was the Mass, because of the participation in Christ's suffering and the redemption arising from it. The use of the liturgical year as a backdrop for a structured approach to spiritual development was useful, as it allowed her to follow the life of Jesus in a circular, structured form. She described her experiences of looking at the image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and of Benediction as, "... sort of I was looking at him and he was looking at me and no words were necessary."

The ability to be self-aware was a significant characteristic in developing a spiritual dimension, as she became more aware of noticing small judgments and her aim was to allow Jesus to live in her, speak through her and deal with others. However a key characteristic was friendship with God and “a deep friendship with Christ and intimate communion with Christ.” Interestingly in describing Christ living in her and operating through her she commented, “I think what I’m becoming more aware of is that God loves me as I am. What he wants is for me to become truly myself.”

#### **Participant 24**

Participant 24 was a male member of a religious order and ordained priest, resident within the Archdiocese. He had been born and raised outwith the Archdiocese and recalled being brought up with his siblings in a devout Roman Catholic family that attended Mass and Benediction at least once a week, some family members attending Mass more frequently. He was baptized shortly after birth and noted that Roman Catholicism had been important to his family, and to him, in terms of community and identity: “...a very strong sense of Catholic faith ...core element of our identity as a people.”

He described his relationship with the Church as “strong” with “a strong sense of my identity as a member of the Catholic community.” In explaining this view, he stated that it was “...part of the way in which I

look at life” and it was difficult to make a distinction between himself and his faith.

He described theology as “...an intellectual articulation of the Church’s experience”, which experience was its tradition, and in particular the lived experience of the Church, comprising various aspects such as worship and the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. For him, theology was the means by which the Church “...articulates intellectually in ways that can be commonly shared and agreed and an understanding, and that to my mind is what theology is about.” His reasoning for the Church’s articulation of its experience was to teach what was important in deepening the appreciation of those participating, and of what it was they were celebrating: “...in order to deepen the appreciation of those who are members of the Church...the Church teaches.”

Mass had always been an important aspect of this participant’s life, from childhood, attending with his family, through to being a celebrant as a priest. He described Mass this way: “To me [t]he most fundamental way in which I express my faith is participation in the Eucharist,” because its celebration and reception involved carrying forward the mission of Christ. Also, for him, it was a celebration of the reality of Christ, risen and amongst people. Significantly, to him the Eucharist was not just a commemoration, but “it’s the reality of Christ’s

presence among us”, giving him a “profound sense of “being invited,” “receiving” and “being given”.

He described his beliefs as orthodox and that they were the beliefs of the Church: “...they are my beliefs but they are only my beliefs because they are the beliefs of the Church and because I believe in the Church.” This in turn was founded on his belief that, “the Church as I experience it was founded by Christ” and his belief in “...the Christian faith as it is lived and expressed by that body of believers who are in communion with the Bishop of Rome.”

He described faith as “...a confident and hope-filled sense of dependence on God”, which may be understood in terms of theology. In comparison, religion as a term denoted for him “...actual ritual practices.” The intensity of his faith and commitment to the church varied over time and he noted that lower levels of intensity may be associated with “idleness” and “sloth”, but that times of greater intensity also occurred being, “...a heightened sense of faith and awareness of God.” Times of retreat he regarded as being helpful, during which he would “...give up all the ordinary occupations that made up...life” and “...stand back from the sort of things in which we are ordinarily imbedded.” This removal from ordinary distractions, with the structured life on retreat, facilitated a filling of his mind with “...prayer of the Scriptures”, which aided the sense of intensity of faith.

Notions of belonging and community were important to this participant, describing himself as being "...baptized in the Catholic community" and his family holding the Catholic faith at the core of their identity, leading him to say he had "...a strong sense of my identity as a member of the Catholic community." The sense of community was particularly strong in the context of the Mass:

"In the celebration of the Eucharist I have a much more overt sense...there is a gathered body of believers...I see people and I get the sense of we are all one through the reception of the grace of God in this community."

Within spirituality it was important that the focus was on God rather than him, as it was about being "...more open to come to greater freedom in living out God's relationship with me." He considered 'spirituality' to be a difficult term to define because he felt that in being taken to extremes it "...comes perilously close to lying in a warm bath surrounded by aromatherapy candles" and certainly felt there could be spirituality without recourse to a notion of God. He understood it in terms of that which governed lives, "...that fundamental value that motivates their lives", and was a means of centring people, giving meaning to their lives and allowing them to "re-integrate" with themselves thereby facilitating renewal, and in so doing "...they have to

know who they are, know what they are doing.” Spirituality for him differed from faith, religion and theology in that these others were communal whereas spirituality was essentially personal: “...it’s about what I acknowledge.” Thus spirituality, for him, was about giving purpose to life at an individual level and about “...what I am called to do”, which was not necessarily linked to a notion of God, though for him spirituality was intrinsically connected to God.

He spoke of three levels: Level One was about “...a profound experience of God”, Level Two was about “...being embodied in some particular experience of God’s action in the world”, and Level Three was “...wanting to do the things that will keep that sensible God alive.” Furthermore he was very clear that it did not relate to the building up of one’s own spiritual life: “...It’s not at all about my relationship with God. It’s about God’s relationship with me.”

An important expression of his spirituality was through participation in the Eucharist, because it was both central to the advancing of Christ’s mission and “a celebration of the reality of Christ risen to walk among us,” not merely a commemoration. It drew to his attention the presence of God not only in the ritual of Mass but throughout his life, especially a sense of having been invited into union with Christ, giving rise to profound senses of reciprocity. He described spirituality as “...that way of life that keeps me open to the generosity of God and inspires me to live out the gifts God has given to me”, the

most important element for him being "...companionship with Christ as the way to be open to God" and, in so doing, being as sure as one could be that one was "...responding as Christ would have responded."

The participant was eager to distinguish between devotional practices and spiritual practices and felt that these were often confused; devotional acts, those acts which, for him may give people a great sense of God, and spiritual practices relating to an association or participation with Christ in carrying His cross. He explained further that to him spiritual practices referred to "...what helps me to keep alive my desire to accompany Christ, to carry his cross, labouring for the redemption of the world." One practice useful to him was a process by which he would review his life and identify those occurrences giving rise to such experiences, but which could not be ascribed to "...any confidence on my part, the surprising things", revealing something of the relationship between God and him, rather than of his interpretation of the relationship between God and him. This involved a distinguishing between "mundane moments" and "spiritual moments", the latter being for him "...those moments which I recognize as having transformed my openness to God. My openness to the meaning that God is giving to my life, rather than the sense of meaning life has given to me."

He considered the spiritual life to be "dynamic", carrying a sense of energy and change, and if it was static he felt he would be

concerned that it was focused on him rather than God. Of fundamental significance was developing a capacity of being open to God:

“I don’t believe that what is important is that I find something concrete, that it’s not just what I think God wants me to do. I think it is what God is giving me to do.”

Being constantly open to God and what God was giving in his life was how this participant understood the practicalities of the spiritual life. The most important element of spirituality, for him, was a relationship with Christ, to be both closer to God and More Christ-like..”

### **Synopsis**

In this chapter we have taken the transcripts of interviews of five participants and re-drawn same in a richly descriptive manner that allows us to see further into their understanding and experience of the phenomenon of spirituality as it has been for them in their contemporary setting. The descriptions have been tied to the original narratives through the use of quotations, in order that we may retain a flavour of the participants whilst describing their narrative in new and insightful ways, affording us an opportunity to identify, resonate and associate therewith.



In the next chapter we seek to explore further some of the key elements of each of these narratives by further applying our hermeneutic phenomenological enquiry to identify themes and threads and thereafter how these experiences are specifically spiritual.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Hermeneutic Phenomenological Enquiry**

#### **Introduction**

In the previous chapter we prepared narratives from the transcripts in order to offer descriptive accounts of the participants' experiences of spirituality within the context of the case study, having regard to the ethical constraints of the approach.

In this chapter we apply the second stage of a hermeneutic phenomenology, enquiring on the transcripts, seeking key characteristics and how these are understood by each participant, noting that these characteristics are not ethereal but unique distinguishing features. In particular consideration will be given to how the notion of "Gift" and Reciprocity may operate within participants' understandings. In the following chapter we will look amongst the narratives and enquiries for themes and threads which may have assisted participants in their spiritual journey, which is the final stage in a hermeneutic phenomenological enquiry. Taking them together with this and the previous chapter will enable us to better assess the suitability of this approach in the study of spiritual experience.

### **Methodological Approach**

We commence by making enquiries on aspects which appear significant to the participant, as identified in the narratives of the previous chapter. As this is a case study with limited space and its purpose is to assess the hermeneutic phenomenological approach, we will draw out a number of aspects but apply this approach to one such aspect in more detail, in order to help us assess the effectiveness of this approach. This enquiry uses the original transcripts, both to maintain integrity with the original sources and because the transcripts contain additional information which is helpful but which, due to ethical reasons such as confidentiality or anonymity, cannot appear in research outcomes. The practical outworking is through reduction using the Hermeneutic Circle, incorporating complexification. Van Manen reminds us that what we seek is that which makes the experience unique from other experiences, but not ethereal and incomprehensible (Van Manen 1997, 39).

As will be discussed in Chapters 7 and 8 phenomenology's epoché permits us to bracket out questions of truth, such as notions of God, and focus and accept as true for each participant their understandings and experiences as contained within the narratives and transcripts, whilst continuing to offer an empathic approach to each participant's contribution. As the locus is the discipline of spirituality, not theology, theological concerns and theories are not relevant. Rather we

are interested in the applicability of this approach from a discipline capable of operating outwith the dogma of any particular tradition under consideration. This is not to deny or reject such theories, however bracketing as expounded in Chapters 7 and 8 allows us to place them aside in order to consider the spiritual aspects.

To assist us in assessing this methodological approach we will identify key characteristics then explore in greater detail one particular aspect of spirituality found within the narrative for each participant. The topics are identity, relationship, authenticity, community and the Eucharist respectively. The notion of “Gift” in the context of this case study will be considered in the following chapter.

## **Interpretation of the narratives**

### **Participant 5**

Participant 5 described spirituality as being “crucial to my life” involving a deepening relationship with God, “growing in faith and knowledge of God” and “the return you get from God.”

### **Roman Catholicism**

Roman Catholicism was highly significant to her. She described herself as a “cradle catholic” and felt it was a defining feature, providing a context within which she could understanding her life experiences. She felt it was a birthright and important to have an ancestral

connection to Roman Catholicism, tracing this through her parents and grandparents, with a desire for her family to remain exclusively within this tradition, comparing being Roman Catholic to being Jewish, particularly the intertwining of religion and nationality.

### **Identity**

She lived in a context dominated by Roman Catholicism, from which she derived identity and meaning. Moreover we can ascertain that the meaning was of such value to her that it was her desire that her children also accept it. She was actively practising, rather than passively accepting, the life involved in being Roman Catholic at a time of decline in church membership and substantial social changes. She considered the relationship with God to be mutual, referring to a return from God, and stated specifically that this relates to spirituality incorporating personal involvement, a mutual relationship involving two parties. Roman Catholicism however appears more significant than the Roman Catholic Church, which implies that the assimilation of the characteristics of Roman Catholicism was of greater relevance to her than adherence to institutional practices.

She felt connected to her ancestors, especially their originating from Ireland. We noted in Chapter 6 the difficulties faced by Irish migrants to Scotland, the role of the Roman Catholic Church in providing for them and the development of a very strong, supportive

community around the Church, from which we can draw a sense of solidarity in community. This illustrates a nexus of hereditary and community located around the Church, the influence of which has been pronounced in shaping her perspective of life and her identity.

### **Community**

The participant described responsibilities largely in terms of the Roman Catholic community rather than the Roman Catholic Church as an institution. For example she did not refer to financial support to the Institution, nor to subscribing to a clear constitutional formation and she was unclear about a number of issues such as theology, leading us to view her life-world in terms of participation within the Roman Catholic community as giving meaning and orientation to her life. Thus *being* Roman Catholic was clearly important to her not only in terms of identity but as part of a community. For her, being Roman Catholic gave access to a strong and diverse network of equality, hospitality and welcoming within a distinct entity notwithstanding its global presence. She could draw comfort and support from this global community, though it also placed demands on her, which reinforced that identity and sense of community.

## **Relationship**

Despite viewing the world through the lens of a local suffrage community which is simultaneously part of a global social movement with a distinct identity, the participant saw spirituality not in terms of the institution or relationship with the institution but directly between her and God. The institution served as a means of supporting her relationship with God as a place of sanctuary: she described attending Mass as sometimes being like an “oasis”, carrying notions of refuge and replenishment. We may draw from this that spirituality for her involved peace and renewal, which peace seems to be very practical in that it enabled her to carry on living free of worry and released to enjoy life: “My spirituality frees me up. It liberates me from worry.” Thus for her an aspect of spirituality was as a means to peace and liberation, in order to experience life more fully. A further dimension of this relationship was a need for action, such as being free to speak to others - “spirituality is enhanced by people talking about it” - and to speak up for others - “it is a sin by omission not to stand up for someone.” Thus action, by necessity, arose from her relationship with God.

## **The Roman Catholic Church**

The institution of the Roman Catholic Church was held by her in high regard and was a place offering a structure that “underpins my

whole life.” This, however, implies that it may not be the institution that is fundamental to her life but rather that the institution facilitates elements that underpin her life, by constituting a structure interpreted by her and to which meaning is attached within a Roman Catholic paradigm. The institution was where she placed much trust, as well as acceptance of it having sound explanations and truths, which freed her from needing to be concerned about them. It was important to her spiritual development through providing practical support via a network of priests, a repository for beliefs, dogma and theology, such that it appeared sufficient for her to rely on knowing that the institution bore the intellectual burden, freeing her to live by those aspects she needed for daily living, including rites such as the Mass. The institution maintained routines and facilitated community structures, principally through parishes, which she felt were readily accessible and provided opportunities to aid her in her life and spiritual development.

### **Authenticity**

The participant associated spiritual practices with grace, being “the strength you get from the Holy Spirit”, and felt the effort of spirituality was not hers, but came from within her, such that spiritual practices were about finding God within her. She appeared earnest in seeking God and held that God was working in her life, an “unfolding of God’s plan.” She professed a deep need of God and a desire to follow



him, which aligns with a notion of authenticity; seeking to be that which she was made by God, to be true to herself as created by God, which was an on-going transformative process.

### **Closer Consideration: Identity**

In examining more closely her description of herself as a “cradle Catholic,” she drew connections with her parents having brought her up within the Roman Catholic tradition and of her desire to do likewise. This however appears to refer to her and her family lineage rather than the institution, suggesting that it, though important, is not central here: she claimed “my religion is truly my universal soul.” She considered membership of the Roman Catholic Church as similar to nationality, and thus saw a parallel between being Roman Catholic with nationhood rather than community and family. Describing herself as a cradle catholic, and Roman Catholicism as “what defines me” suggests that she draws identity and understanding of her life-world from Roman Catholicism. However she views the institution as a support structure, a place of “great brains”, of equality - “meet people on the same level” - and of accessibility to priests. From this we can begin to interpret what it is that may be central to her identity structure. We noted in Chapter 3 how identity operated in self-awareness, understanding and relationships with others.

In Chapter 6 we noted the difficulties faced by Irish migrants to Scotland during the nineteenth century. This participant connected closely with her family's ancestry in Ireland, even though she had never visited the country and a number of subsequent generations had been born and raised in Scotland. It is possible to correlate her family's ancestry with the struggle of the Irish migrants, their support from the Roman Catholic Church and the strong identities and communities created under such difficult circumstances, from which we may observe a nexus of a perceived suffrage community associated with the Roman Catholic Church, located within a contemporary setting, producing a life-world view. In supporting such an interpretation we note a distancing of herself from being Scottish, a close association with family, an attachment to the Roman Catholic community and affection for the institution. We also find a sense of deep reliance on God, originating possibly in experiencing a struggle to survive as faced by the migrants, associated with practical faith in the action of God, a sense of God providing as well as her obligation to defend those challenged: she needed to speak out against a wrong, otherwise it would be "a sin by omission". Such support may have been needed within the early migrant population.

We can interpret her identity, described in terms of a cradle catholic, back to a sense of a supportive, caring and enduring community, rooted in faith and trust in God and supported by the

institution. This aspect of spirituality is unique for her because her heritage, her connection and immersion in Roman Catholicism and community operate in her identity formation, providing her with a life-world view which makes sense of daily living and assists her in living through it. It is not simply that the structure of the Roman Catholic Church offers a sufficient resource for identity but rather that her familial ties located within a former suffrage community operates in conjunction with a closely associated religious form, which together bring her to a position of having a particular life-world view, makes meaning of the world for her and operates in the creation and development of her identity. Attendance to the obligations of Roman Catholicism would not of itself provide such a life-world: it is in part the interplay of these factors which makes spirituality real and vibrant for her.

### **Participant 9**

#### **Relationship**

The Holy Spirit Weekend of an Alpha course was of considerable influence upon this participant, which led to his involvement with the Charismatic Movement. He professed a deep faith, describing his beliefs as “quite strong” and a deeply personalised - “definitely believe in Jesus...came to save me...it’s a personalised thing” - which accords with the Charismatic Movement and offers a lens

through which he understands and finds meaning to his life-world. It is interesting that, although drawn to the Charismatic Movement, in which he felt freer to express himself, nevertheless he also wanted to be more active in his parish community, indicating the importance of community and the liturgical structure of the parish and their flexibility in enabling divergent practices to co-operate within the parish.

He emphasised direct personal experience of God and it was from this experiential perspective that he understood his relationship with God, viewing this relationship as direct, rather than mediated through the Roman Catholic Church, and as practical and life-changing, prioritising practical understanding over theory.

### **Freedom**

The participant frequently expressed trust as well as acknowledgement of God's providence offering freedom, through recognising God's active involvement in his life. During difficult times he would seek God even more and accepted there was a response from God: "I'm starting to learn in life that you do get gifts from the Lord that you have not earned." Whilst he clearly viewed his relationship with God as direct and unmediated, the Church remained important and significant - "I basically love the Church" - because it held mystery and, though imperfect and having failings, it still honoured God. He felt it was God's church, "not a human thing" with God having ordained Peter

as first pope. He therefore appears to consider the Church as being a place which accommodates his own approach to God and offering a place of expression for his spiritual growth whilst accepting its limitations. His view of the church is interesting as he describes two closely linked but separate entities; the Church as institution, holding theology, liturgy, administration and other practices and the traditions and mysteries, which he was not prepared to judge and, separately, the Church as a body of people, forming a community support, which, though closely associated with the institution, did not meet as a direct consequence or obligation arising from membership of the institution but rather from a desire to do so. His relationship with the Church was different to that with God: the Church as institution provided a structure and a community setting within which relationships could develop, but his relationship with God was direct and persistent, not subject to the Church.

### **Theology**

The participant thought that theology, though useful, had to be guarded against to some extent because, “you are trying to understand”. The importance of this was that he viewed over-intellectualisation of faith as problematic in terms of understanding which seeks to take priority over experience. Hence spirituality for him subrogates the position of theology in favour of experience.

### **The Eucharist**

The Eucharist was of central importance to him, because he believed it drew him directly to the Last Supper and was a response to Jesus' call to "do this in remembrance of me", but also because it was "the most powerful thing I can get from the Lord", which suggests a form of reciprocity. He gave priority to a sense of being cleansed of sin, having a strong sense of sinfulness and the need for forgiveness, connected to making an effort to reduce sinful practices and "wean yourself off", whilst holding that God was "a practical person." There appears a very personal dimension to the Eucharist in renewing and protecting. His experience of God was of a relationship in which God was patient and forgiving.

### **Spirituality**

Spirituality was a gift from God which, once received and accepted, led to God guiding and bestowing graces, associated with feelings of "overwhelming joy." In particular he spoke of awareness and receptivity towards God whereby he would undertake what he thought God had asked him to do, even if he did not know why, accepting that spirituality was about continuous change.

### **Authenticity**

We can interpret this participant's understanding of spirituality as being a direct relationship with God, not dependent on external requirements such as theology nor mediated through the Church but as liberating and dynamic, that God's call was unexpected, "something that'll be different from what you think," which he could personally experience. Spirituality therefore incorporated trust in God and was in part about freedom to be as God called him. The process of always changing, of receiving graces and answering God's call are all supportive of a notion of awareness of God's calling to authenticity.

### **Closer Consideration: Relationship**

We turn to consider in more detail the idea of relationship. This participant placed considerable emphasis on the nature of his relationship with God, which permeates his narrative, importantly illustrating his understanding of the extent and nature of his relationship with God which is central to his spirituality. His understanding of his relationship is from an experiential process of engaging, ratifying and trust which leads him to state that he would follow God's call even if he did not know or understand why, which is indicative of a close and trusting relationship. Importantly he places priority on experience over theology and intellectualisation.

Early in the narrative this participant describes having attended an Alpha Course after which he and fellow members of his parish decided to become more actively involved and spoke frequently about the actions of the Holy Spirit in particular, of which he would be likely to be more attentive following his move towards the Charismatic Movement. However he was less concerned about the intellectual understanding associated with faith and God's actions: "I don't need to understand it." So we find from the narrative that he places more emphasis on experience than on intellectual knowledge.

The participant described being attracted to the Charismatic Movement after an Alpha Course, and that in particular it was the Holy Spirit weekend on this course that had been most influential. McGrath states that Charismatic Movements place an emphasis on immediacy and an experiential relationship with the Holy Spirit (McGrath 1997, 427) and Downey suggests that they are biblically based, laity focussed and liturgical (Downey 1997, 83). Within the narrative we note several references to liturgy, such as the use of the Rosary at weekly meetings and the need for and power of regular attendance at Mass. He met with others, not clergy, which supports Downey's 'laity focussed' depiction. Thus there is resonance between Downey's depiction of Charismatic Movements and this narrative, particularly McGrath's description of the Charismatic Movement's emphasis on experience and immediacy. These are also supported by the narrative which



illustrates Downey's description of a Charismatic worldview which "evokes deeper appreciation of the commitment to personal prayer, communal working and holiness of life formed by the Word of God" (Downey 1997, 83). However the Charismatic dimension remains located within the parish setting so we can interpret a change in focus towards experiential aspects of Christian living whilst remaining within a parish setting. The participant describes a bi-directional relationship with God, which is founded in part on past experience, but largely on trust and expectation that the relationship, and its manifestation, will continue.

Accordingly, when we return to the particular aspect of interest, his sense of a direct relationship with God appears to be derived, in part, from trust founded upon an experiential view of his life-world, in which God acts directly in his life and without his needing to intellectually rationalise events.

### **Participant 10**

Participant 10 recalled having been involved in various Christian denominations prior to becoming Roman Catholic. Whilst homeless with a young family her interaction with a Christian denomination had led to greater involvement, leading to ordination and employment. Although she had been involved with and accepted into various denominations she was sufficiently strongly pulled towards Roman

Catholicism that, notwithstanding having been ordained to ministry, she became part of a tradition in which that vocation could not be lived out.

### **Roman Catholicism**

Roman Catholicism was particularly important to her because it was within this context she felt she could “hold it all together” and sustain a dynamic life and relationship with God. This relationship was important and directly with God. She noted advantages of her having been involved in a number of denominations and, whilst the role of institutional churches had been important, those institutions themselves were not critical to her as she was able to change from one institutional structure to another, indicating that theological premises were not of first priority. However it is interesting that she required the context of Roman Catholicism, because for her this denomination was simultaneously capable of enveloping different positions whilst enabling her to be satisfied that her life-world could be comfortably accommodated. The moving amongst denominations could not have been easy, her jobs difficult and adherence to strict observances such as the Divine Office, when taken together, suggest driven-ness. There is also a strong element of self-sacrifice which reflects her call for greater humility, highlighted by her acceptance of Roman Catholicism, a tradition in which she was unable to express her sacramental ministry.

## **Theology**

She described herself theologically as liberal and, whilst what was believed wasn't too important, having an understanding was helpful for recognising graces, gifts and meetings with God, which suggest she considered theology and intellectual pursuits as useful but primarily in assisting the experiential dimension of lived faith. She commented that spirituality was about knowing and "not really about feelings" but knowing was neither primarily intellectual knowledge nor emotional feelings. Rather she associated her conversion to Roman Catholicism with a change in understanding from "wishy washy not sure" to "oh yes, I do know now." Knowing for her can be seen as a deeper understanding of her experience with God understood in terms of her life-world.

## **Unity**

Roman Catholicism was attractive because she saw the Church as a place offering unity, which can be aligned with belonging and acceptance. Having regard to her life's journey the significance of acceptance can be appreciated. She found the initiation rites important because they offered an acknowledgement of her commitment rather than a passive falling into a practice, thereby reinforcing the sense of actively being accepted into the Church and thus active acceptance. McBrien describes the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (McBrien

1994, 805 – 808) as essentially a process of Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Communion during which the initiates or *catchumen* undergo a process of pastoral formation. For members of a Christian community seeking to enter into communion with the Roman Catholic Church the process is less extensive but nevertheless involves a process of introspection prior to profession of faith and admission to Roman Catholic Eucharist. The process climaxes at the Easter Vigil (McBrien 1994, 805–808) which of itself is a profound ritual (Baldovin 1990, 549-551). The initiation for this participant was clearly profound for her because it involved a deeply experiential acceptance into a community, bringing her into a place where she felt unity and from that to a sense of freedom: liberty in belief, and practice, whilst still being accepted.

### **Spirituality**

The importance of unity for Participant 10 was more apparent through her contrasting comments on members of other denominations who are dismissive of spirituality or on spiritual experiences claimed by others who “deny the spiritual” and “say that you can’t have a hotline to God”, so her pursuing a dynamic spiritual life was at variance to these comments, making her feel less accepted, whereas within Roman Catholicism she found freedom to be herself whilst being part of a community.

## **Community**

Community was clearly significant, partly through a sense of belonging and also through the opportunity to share in the liturgy. Mass had been, and continued to be, an important element in her life, which she attended daily, and for her was about meeting with God, God coming to her as she attended Mass to come to God, leading to a sense of mutuality and reciprocity. She described other liturgical and devotional practices which she found helpful and a place for sharing. She used *lectio divina* as a means of praying with Scripture, offering opportunities to meet with God and prayed the Rosary communally each week as it helped her feel part of the prayer life of the Church. Developing a relationship with God was a priority for her and she employed a range of approaches, devotional and spiritual, personal and communal, to aid her in this.

## **Relationship**

The participant understood spirituality in terms of relationship with God and the possibility of having direct communication with God. The spiritual life, for her, was dynamic and changing, to which were connected notions of healing and forgiveness leading to spiritual development. The concepts of healing and forgiveness suggest both a discarding of that which is not 'right' and of becoming more of what is

'right' with God. 'Right' can be considered in terms of God's call to her and thus about authenticity.

### **Freedom**

Spirituality was, she felt, for others rather than about personal fulfilment and she acknowledged that there was a danger that routinisation could become more important than the objective, suggesting for her a clear distinction, which is interesting given her adherence to methodological spiritual practices, suggesting that for her there is a need to distinguish between what is done from why it is done. This would accord with her moving amongst denominations and she noted that spirituality was "a freedom from all the things that tie us down...things that are helpful are not the things in themselves...it's a help to go through it."

### **Authenticity**

This leads to her description of spirituality as "becoming less of me and my ego, what I want and what God wants and it's a gradual thing" and ultimately that "you just know." All of which carries within it the notion of spirituality as about awareness of God, discerning His call and following it, which is authenticity. Thus for her Roman Catholicism was a place where she could hold beliefs about a direct relationship with God whilst being supported and accepted, enabling her to be freer

to be herself, facilitating greater self-acceptance so leading to greater authenticity.

### **Closer Consideration: Authenticity**

We will now look closer at authenticity within the context of this participant's narrative. During a dramatic period in her life, whilst homeless with a young family, she became involved with a Christian denomination and had subsequently been involved with various denominations. She had had associations with a monastic order and described this as being of great benefit. Although ordained to ministry within a Christian denomination she became a member of the Roman Catholic Church, relinquishing the possibility of exercising that vocation. But she felt the Catholic Church was a place where she was accepted and free to be herself and thus, in seeking wholeness, she chose this freedom over ministry. She spoke of finding great benefit in offering prayerful support to those she felt were unable to pray for themselves, suggesting a desire for an outwardly-focussed spiritual practice, of forgiveness as an often-forgotten but important part of spirituality, and of being open to and in communication with God leading ultimately to an acceptance of herself. In this participant we observe someone who has striven to serve God and deepen her relationship with him, involving dramatic changes in her life, but her decisions were focussed on a deepening relationship with God,

therefore about her becoming more as God wanted her to be and thus more authentic.

### **Participant 14**

Participant 14 had been very happy as a member of a religious community from the age of eighteen, having had a sense of calling to this vocation as a child, with Mass and Benediction opening to her a sense of holiness and sacredness.

### **Knowledge**

When older, but prior to joining the religious community, she described “enjoying life” and thus was able to describe discernment between spiritual and non-spiritual dimensions. This included an attraction to a spiritual lifestyle which had led her to monasticism, which together with the appreciation of there being more to life describes a sense of being drawn and suggests different types of knowledge: reasoned or ‘*head*’ knowledge and a form of knowing that is derived from inner feelings and convictions, ‘*heart*’ knowledge, though not ordinary emotional feelings. For example she described knowing of Christ’s redemptive powers not principally through theological study but “because I know it in my bones.” She drew a distinction between theology as “knowledge about God” and faith as “knowledge of God”, describing how it is possible to know much about someone without



actually really knowing them. She was motivated and guided to a large extent by 'heart' knowledge and a desire to know God, rather than know about him. We can interpret this as her life-world being primarily reliant on experiential or heart knowledge with head or intellectual knowledge being influential but secondary.

### **Theology**

Her theological understandings were those learned through the Catholic Church, however she placed particular emphasis on the dual nature of Jesus as human and divine, specifically linked to the notion of redemption, which we may interpret as her having considerable trust in the institution as the source of truth for her life-world and also her ability to put to one side a need for detailed intellectual understanding. Redemption was important to her and in particular she believed that part of the specialness of Mass was in transporting those participating back to the Christ's sacrifice, thereby undergoing unification in time and space, the Eucharist imparting transformative powers of forgiveness, acceptance and a greater awareness of God, facilitating a deepening relationship. Importantly the level of attentiveness was not relevant. The practical forgiveness/reconciliation made present in Mass offers assurance of acceptance by Christ in a very close relationship with Him.

### **Relationship**

She found Benediction impressive and a means of connection with Jesus. She spoke of her devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and especially Christ's call, which had been of profound influence during her childhood, from which we can draw an interpretation that these devotions and awarenesses were especially significant to her by reminding her of God's love for her personally. She described a strong devotion to Mary the Mother of Jesus, together with feelings of being deeply loved, which may be interpreted as these liturgical practices representing for her a depth of compassion, love, acceptance, and continual reconciliation through forgiveness as elements of her relationship with Jesus and Mary.

### **Community**

Community was clearly important to the participant as she renewed her desire to be part of the religious community daily, but it was also a construct through which she gave meaning to life. Moreover, to her, 'community' spoke of unity, which extended beyond her monastic community and may be interpreted as involving a much more inclusive connection and greater sense of one-ness, for example her sense of concern for the world - "we're representing the whole human race" - and of her experience of Jesus' love, indicating a desire she holds for others to experience that same love.

## **Relationship**

Her personal relationship with God was strong, however she desired to develop this further by spending time alone with God. Liturgical and devotional practices together offered a sense in which spirituality was a journey of development, including a developing sense of awareness of self and God. The participant described a direct experience of Jesus as a rare event which had remained with her and which we can differentiate from the other, 'ordinary' experiences of God, such as the sense of Jesus' love, as mystical rather than spiritual. This usefully illustrates the practical significance of this differentiation, but also how mystical experiences can form part of spirituality. Her relationship with God could be described as an active pursuit of personal connection and confidence through practices, rather than increased intellectual knowledge. She observed about this relationship that, "what I'm becoming more aware of is that God loves me as I am and what He wants for me is to become truly myself", which describes authenticity and how her relationship assists her search for authenticity.

## **Closer Consideration: Community**

Let us consider briefly an interpretation of the participant's conception of community. Adams described the religious life as one characterised by an "observance of common life" (Adams 1993, 818). The sister stated that it was not easy living in community, that this

needed to be “worked at”, suggesting that, for her, community involved submission to God’s will, daily renewal of the desire to live a common life and be part of that community as a locus within which to experience God. She viewed community participation in the Eucharist as crucial because taking part in the Eucharist was sufficient, bringing participants closer to Christ in His eternal sacrifice making community not only about a common life but being part of the process of drawing closer to God and a means to become more Christ-like.

Community also operates in developing identity in a safe place where individuals can explore their relationship with God in an accepting, non-judgemental environment. It also provides a means, for her, of response to God because her understanding of the Sacred Heart of Jesus was about him, “just telling us how much he loves us and asking for our love in return”. We may interpret Christ’s call for a return of love as being answered by her living a religious life in community, through which she is able to demonstrate that return of love, develop a closer relationship with God and become increasingly authentic.

### **Participant 24**

Participant 24 had lived within the Archdiocese’s boundaries for a number of years and was both a member of a religious order and a priest.

## **Community**

He described himself by reference to membership of the Roman Catholic community rather than the Roman Catholic Church, differentiating between the body of persons and the institution, which we can interpret as community being important to him whilst still feeling closely aligned to the institution. It is the confidence he holds through his experience of the Roman Catholic community which enables him to accept the institution's teachings.

The Eucharist offered him a deeper sense of community, which we can interpret as meaning for him a distinct, uniting relationship experienced by the participant within the community coming together for that Eucharistic celebration and thus an experience of unity as well as community within the Eucharistic celebration, which assisted him in focussing on God and becoming "more open to come to greater freedom in living out God's relationship with me."

## **Liturgy**

The participant was introduced to liturgy, teachings and practices of the church from a young age, from which it may be suggested that familiarity led to such acceptance. However he specifically refers to his experience which, although influenced by such familiarity, is not second-hand experience or acceptance of teachings but rather, for him, a personal experience of God understood within his

Roman Catholic construct. This offers an interpretation of the processes by which he understands his life-world as in relationship with and experience of God, deeply absorbed in the institution's teachings, with which his understandings and experiences resonate.

His description of participation in the Eucharist describes putting himself to one side to experience a more direct, but not mystical, that is a rare out-of-body union with God, but rather experience of God as a satisfying, trusting and enriching sense of the fullness of life. This interpretation is supported by the narrative's descriptions of the benefit he felt in the Eucharist, particularly the frequent celebration of this Liturgy from which he gained this profound sense of being invited and receiving.

### **Relationship**

He described this relationship with the God as "a confident and hope-filled sense of dependence on God" which we can interpret as conveying a sense of (1) freedom, being about dependence on God allowing freedom from 'normal' pressures of living; (2) relationship, arising from this on-going dependency and (3) joy, being both confident and hope-filled. Therefore his understanding of this relationship is as a loving, engaging and dynamic relationship.

## **Theology**

The basis for him clearly accepting the Church's beliefs as his own was that he understood theology as "an intellectual articulation of the Church's experience", expressed in a manner that could be commonly agreed and shared, in order to enable the Church to teach, thereby deepening the understanding of the faith of the members of the Roman Catholic community. But they became his beliefs because these beliefs were founded on the Church's experience and his experience of the Church was of it being founded on Christ. This demonstrates a close resonance and identification between the Church's theology and his personal experience of God, which operates to sustain and give meaning to his life-world. It is the confidence he holds in his experience that enables him to accept the institution's teachings.

The most profound way he expressed his faith was through participation in the Eucharist, which gave him a sense of being invited, being both personally given and receiving from which we can interpret a number of characteristics: (1) receiving suggests contact with and acceptance by God thus he experiences a direct relationship with God, not something mediated or distant and (2) invitation suggests that, although the Sacrament is extended to all, he experiences within it a unique relationship between himself and God as an individual, even as

he is part of a group. There is a sense of a deep and personal, intimate and on-going experiential relationship.

### **Relationship**

His comments about being open to God, giving priority to the relationship with God (he was particular about the relationship being God's relationship with him, rather than his relationship with God), and desiring to respond can be interpreted as a desire to be more Christ-like through openness to God and trusting in God's transformative power, leading him to be as Christ would want him to be or to be authentic.

### **Spirituality**

The participant felt spirituality was about developing a capacity to be open to God, suggesting dynamism, and that it was "not just what I think God wants me to do. I think it is what God is giving me to do." An interpretation of which is that, in being more open to God, that God's will for him and God's desires were what really mattered. He described both 'ordinary' experiences of God and also recounted specific events: spirituality was entwined within ordinary living.

He was clear that to him spirituality was not restricted to Christianity but was about having a sense of "what I am called to do", this being a feeling of wholeness or authenticity and purpose. Within



Christianity, he felt that spirituality involved outward action into the world, endeavouring to reconcile the world to God. Spiritual practices assisted because they helped sustain his desire to accompany Christ and spiritual practices rather than devotional practices were, fundamentally, about the desire to accompany Christ.

### **Closer Consideration: Eucharist**

Let us consider a little closer the place of the Eucharist within the spirituality of this participant. The Eucharist is both Liturgy and Sacrament, by which the Church proclaims the life, death and resurrection of Christ and offers glory to God (La Verdiere 1993, 357). For the Roman Catholic Church it is a means of conveying and celebrating the complex Mystery of God and the meaning and consequences of a relationship with God. This participant closely aligned himself with the theology of the Church, so we can anticipate his concurrence with this understanding of the Eucharist. He described the Eucharist in experiential terms, both of individuals and the Church, the Church's experience being articulated in her theology. To him the Eucharist was "the most fundamental way in which I express my faith" and he cited two reasons: its centrality in advancing Christ's mission and its celebration of the Reality of Christ's Risen Presence. He emphasised not the commemorative nature of the Eucharist but rather its proclamation of "Christ's presence among us."

His description of spirituality implied a sense of purpose and experiencing Christ as an important element in his becoming more open, coming to greater freedom to live in relationship with God, which relationship he described as “a confident and hope-filled sense of dependence on God.” Ritual’s function of social transaction, enabling connection between a person and the Sacred, conveying something greater than itself, offers us an insight into this participant’s understanding of his life-world, which we can interpret as functioning as a means of expressing faith and facilitating experiential awareness, invoking an active process in maintaining and developing his relationship with God.

### **Conclusions**

In this chapter we moved from fresh, rich descriptions that remained close to the participants’ towards an interpretation for each participant of a sample of important elements and a closer analysis of one such element. The purpose of this was to facilitate consideration of the methodology from a practical perspective. In the subsequent chapters, such consideration assists us to move towards a closer sense of what meanings the participants attach to or understand about spirituality through their spiritual experiences. The approach does not seek obtuse, ethereal or ‘mystical’ understandings, but rather that which sets these experiences apart as spiritual. Together with the

previous chapter, this chapter offers an opportunity to understand aspects of spirituality from within the study, offering a more detailed and enriched position through both descriptive narratives with both offers a greater opportunity to appreciate the participants' experiences and also to find resonance with aspects of the narratives. The next useful phase is to consider all the participants together, which is part of the purpose of the next chapter, together with drawing conclusions from the study.

The elements drawn out of the study are classed as *themes*: features or characteristics of spirituality, and *threads*: elements that function to hold together or interconnect themes and are discussed further in Chapter 10. In our consideration of a particular topic from each participant we have noted four themes: identity, relationship, authenticity and community and one thread: Eucharist. In the following chapter we will consider further themes and threads in the context of this case study.

This final phase endeavours to enable identification of key, significant and important issues whilst maintaining the integrity of the narrative/participant relationship, in order to offer a deeper exploration of the accounts from an interpretative stance. Importantly in this regard the methodology does not seek 'sameness' but rather *resonancy* within the narratives, as well as insights describing the object of enquiry in a

manner with which others may resonate and identify (Van Manen 1997, 39).



## **Chapter 6**

### **Threads, Themes and Conclusions**

#### **Introduction**

In the previous two chapters the initial stages of hermeneutic phenomenology were applied to the study of contemporary spirituality in the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of St Andrews and Edinburgh by firstly creating rich, descriptive narratives that remained faithful to the narratives and by tying them together through quotations. Thereafter a hermeneutic phenomenological enquiry sought a better understanding of the experiences described by the participants, through an interpretative process, by drawing out topics that appeared significant to the participant, attempting to balance the endeavour of highlighting these significant topics whilst not destroying the holistic uniqueness of each contribution.

The final stage involved identifying themes and threads, themes being largely features and threads, more practical activities, such as the performance of ritual. Though different, themes and threads co-operate in the formation of experience. The differentiation is significant because it assists in the identification of aspects that make these experiences spiritual, whilst still within the participant's life-world, the recognition of which facilitates drawing out elements which others may resonate with, appreciate or associate.

After this we will consider spirituality within this case study, having particular regard to the Gift motif, though not from a theological perspective as we are assessing the applicability of hermeneutic phenomenology specifically outwith a theology, or other religious formulation, but rather within the discipline of spirituality. After this stage we will note any further observations, prior to drawing conclusions.

Although neither is more important or significant we will firstly consider themes that have become apparent.

### **Themes**

Within themes we seek those elements that are in some way central to the spiritual experiences of some or all the participants, most of which are likely to be personal and possibly unique. Therefore we are attempting to identify issues that resonate, rather than commonalities between or amongst descriptions.

### **Theology**

Theology was understood differently by the participants, covering a range of definitions from “an intellectual articulation of the Church’s experience” to knowledge *about* rather than *of* God. Participant 9 found it both appealing and comforting that the institution “doesn’t have all the answers”, but cautioned that too much attention to

theology meant too much effort was being spent trying to understand the ineffable. Participant 5 felt that theology generally enriched her spirituality whilst Participant 10 felt the Church accepted a wide breadth of theological opinion. In our discussion about defining spirituality, theory (including theology) was of less significance whereas personal experience was central. Heelas and Woodhead describe spirituality in terms of *life-as* and *subjective-life* with the latter being the outcome of a *Subjective Turn*, where life is lived in accordance with experiences rather than externally imposed values, and such an understanding of spirituality can be identified within these contributions. All of the participants regularly attended ritualised services such as Mass and Benediction and prayed the Rosary, which present theological elements in an experiential manner but were under the authority of the institution in which the participants had great confidence. Therefore the theological context was sufficient for them to give meaning to their experiences.

The participants largely described living in accordance with their personal experiences of God and understood those experiences largely within the context of the tradition, as regulated by the institution, but not to a point where institutional dogma was prioritised over their experience. Understanding experience in order that they may more fully appreciate its meaning was more important than theorising its terms. This leads us to a position where theology, though secondary to



experience, is important in the participants' developing spiritual life through providing a context within which meaning could be attached to their experiences.

### **Community**

Participant 5 stated that community gave meaning and orientation to her life, operating as a source of identity and solidarity as well as enabling her to participate within parish settings in many locations, whilst Participant 9 found being part of a community necessary and that different communities served different needs. Participant 10 felt unity, a form of close community, to be important, describing experiences with other denominations where a lack of appreciation about spirituality made her feel different and not accepted. She also described the importance of prayer in the context of sharing in the suffering of others. Participant 14 lived within a religious community, readily identifying the importance of community to her, further evidenced by the daily renewing of her vows to community life. Cohen's description of community in terms of "having something in common"<sup>58</sup> and the critical importance of boundaries which demarcate the community from 'other' can be clearly observed in these narratives, through for example participation in rites and practices that are highly specific to the Roman Catholic community and thus

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<sup>58</sup> Pp 212-213.

boundary 'markers'.<sup>59</sup> Bilton's suggestion that community acts as a protection against globalisation can also be applied to gathering together to participate in rituals which lead to identity-reinforcing observances, such as Mass, Benediction and the Rosary. The idea of community, both ancestrally and contemporarily, offers reinforcement of identity and solidarity, which all the participants highlighted, thereby affirming identity, which we have noted is critical to finding meaning and understanding.

### **Belonging**

An extension of community, but highly significant itself, is belonging. We previously noted that belonging refers to people being concerned with one another, displaying characteristics of sharing, caring, mutuality and togetherness<sup>60</sup> and is descriptive of relationships rather than status. Here we can consider Tonnies *Gemeinschaft* (referring to a real, organic relationship in which there is a sharing of private lives and living together as community) and *Gesellschaft* (referring to a mechanical structure or public living for the purpose of conducting transactions, such as business, which is transient) and the difference between a transitory group formed for a purpose as opposed

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<sup>59</sup> All the participants described, for example, their regular, often daily, attendance at Mass as key and unique characteristic of Roman Catholicism.

<sup>60</sup> For example one may be part of a close family but seek a different form of companionship for spiritual development for which one meets with others who have a deep connection permitting a freedom of exploration not available in *Gemeinschaft*.

to an enduring “close-knit” series of relationships. Although Tonnies describes *Gemeinschaft* in terms of, “home life with its immeasurable influence upon the human soul,” (Tonnies1988, 33-34) within the context of spirituality we can draw out a further sense, that of belonging, which is separate from the community notion of *Gemeinschaft* because it operates not at the personal social level, the intimacy of private lives, but at a spiritual level in which acceptance, forbearance, reliance and mutuality create a place in which an individual is free to explore and express their spirituality without fear of rejection such as may exist within *Gemeinschaft*, which describes intimacy but not necessarily such tolerance.

Belonging was evident in a number of participants’ narratives and pertained to something other than the institutional, focussing largely on God and the Roman Catholic community. Participant 5 spoke of the community in terms of relationships with others, the ability to move easily between parishes, the ability to approach different priests, her family ancestry but also within relaxed family settings where issues of faith arose naturally and without inhibition as characteristic of belonging. Participant 9 spoke of networks of people and of belonging within different communities, each serving different needs: a charismatic setting where he could speak more freely and thus share in a supportive, non-judgemental setting in contrast to a parish setting where he felt attached and involved but the form of

sharing was different. This illustrates the mobility within community and capacity to belong in different settings, thus belonging which is not exclusive. Participant 10 described how it was only within Roman Catholicism that she could “hold it all together” and, through prayer, could be united with others and “sharing in the sufferings of others.” Participant 14 noted prayer was about “...being united with the whole Church.” These examples describe mutuality and sharing in belonging to the Roman Catholic community and are not only about identity and co-operation but about enriching the participants’ life-worlds at a deep level. We can find accord here with Lesniak, Hicks and Garcia-Zamar within a notion of spirituality in the workplace as offering meaning, happiness and motivation, embraced within a sense of belonging<sup>61</sup>. Thus we observe examples of close-knit belonging such as participants 5 and 9 and community belonging, such as participants 10 and 14, both illustrating that the institution is less involved in the process of belonging and rather facilitates belonging through its structures and practices. In so doing it seems that very strong and enduring bonds of friendship, support, care and mutuality are present within the Archdiocese.

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<sup>61</sup> See pp16-19 on perspectives of spirituality and the workplace.

## Openness

Implicit within all the participants' descriptions was their openness to God, which appears to have been an essential element of the relationship. Participant 24 spoke of openness to God's generosity as a way to the freedom offered by God, and Participant 10 spoke of spirituality as involving "less of me and what I want ...and what God wants." Openness was closely associated with relationships, involving participants actively seeking God. For example Participant 9 stated, "Spirituality is a gift. You've got to seek it and once you seek it God will guide you", suggesting a relationship with God was always possible, but not automatic, needing to be desired and pursued rather than passively accepted.

Openness suggests an active interest and willingness to accept, rather than a submissive adherence to duty and obligations and can be interpreted as an active orientation towards God, seeking Him and accepting that which God offers. Heelas and Woodhead refer to the *Subjective Turn* and particularly a move towards "unique experiences of my-self in relation" which accords with this sense of openness described by the participants, because for them this relationship is about an experiential relationship rather than an adherence to rules but differs in that the *Subjective Turn* refers to personal choice in pursuit of self-directed spiritual development, rather than involving dependency and responsiveness to God.

### **Relationship with God**

Tacey's description of spirituality as a transformative relationship with the Sacred, sustaining levels of uncertainty and respect for mystery, resonates with the participants. Each participant described in a unique way a direct and personal relationship with God. Participant 5 spoke in terms of a 'return' from God, strength from the Holy Spirit and being open to the unfolding of God's plan, which she felt was crucial to her life. She was clear the relationship was characterised by a constant desire to deepen knowledge, trust, and experience, following the pursuit of a deepening relationship with God. Participant 9 was very clear that "I probably trust him more now than I ever did," an experientially based statement, and Participant 14 drew a clear distinction between knowledge about God and knowledge of God. Participant 24 described a relationship with God in terms of being open to God, receiving and living out the gifts God had given to him and of accompanying Christ's work in the redemption of the world. Mursell's suggestion is that spirituality is about a process involving God and an individual, through which that individual derives greater meaning, order, purpose and identity (Mursell 2001, 9) and this largely reflects the process described by these participants.

Each participant spoke of two-way interactions involving trust, listening and response, of receiving a strong sense of being loved, belonging, supported and being valued. They described how their

relationships with God had changed and how they, as people, had changed. Relationship by nature is both personal and fluid and that experience is what each participant described, a constantly changing interaction founded on trust and acceptance which was fundamentally rooted in direct personal experience. As Participant 9 noted “it’s a personalised thing” and “I can only personalise it from my own experience.”

### **Authenticity**

The participants described a greater sense of authenticity, being a desire to be and becoming one’s true self. This process was understood as a movement towards being true to oneself, which was as he/she had been created by God, leading to a closer relationship and peace. Participant 5 described it in terms of God’s unfolding plans in her life; Participant 9 spoke of “seeking desires of your heart, spiritual needs that you have”; Participant 14 described the process of authenticity as it related to her thus: “...what He wants for me is to become truly myself.”

Perrin describes this process in terms of the integration of all aspects of a person’s life into a unified whole (Perrin 2007, 17) which leads to honesty with self and others and removing ‘masks’ which we use to hide our true selves. Accordingly authenticity relates not only to a ‘drawing together’ but also ‘shedding’, to reveal the true self. This

involves redefining identity in accordance with the participant's understanding of spiritual experiences in order to find one's true self which is also, for these participants, how they have been created by God. Monastic traditions are a locus for being true to oneself and religious orders have become more involved in sharing their experience with non-monastic communities, with writers such as Thomas Merton having written on this crossover area. Authenticity for these participants was an integral and central element of spirituality.

### **Freedom**

Associated with a developing relationship with God and greater authenticity was a sense of freedom, essentially relating to release. Participant 5 associated this in the context of absence of the pressures of everyday life and, separately, of not worrying about what might unfold in day-to-day living. This view was shared by Participant 10, who noted "the most important spirituality is letting go", and that spirituality offered a release from things that "tied" him down. Participant 24 described Mass as a place from which to become "more open to come to greater freedom in living out God's relationship with me."

In considering this entanglement within Lesniak's "multifaceted yet fragmented world" (Lesniak 2006, 8), the fear and dislocation of a rapidly changing society and culture, together with a fundamental desire to make sense of life, it appears that the participants find a



remedy through this sense freedom. We also noted earlier that the notion of 'peace' was found in all monastic traditions and this is closely associated with a sense of freedom.

Most of the participants described implicitly or alluded to a sense of forgiveness and acceptance within which freedom is experienced. For example, Participant 14 spoke of her devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and its association with Jesus, love and acceptance, of it being hugely influential, comforting and supportive.

### **Dynamism**

All the participants felt their relationship with God was dynamic, with feelings of being closer to God at certain points more than at others, but also that the relationship needed to be dynamic with the absence of dynamism being indicative of a problem. The idea of spirituality as a journey or pilgrimage has been previously noted in Chapter 1. Some participants alluded to their relationship with God being spiral-like, in that whilst it seemed that they had come to the same place, they also felt closer to God, thus for example Participant 5 spoke about the unfolding of God's plan whilst Participant 9 noted, "I probably trust him more now than I ever did" and importantly, "Spirituality is always a call to change." Participant 10 was clear that spirituality was a journey and Participant 24 described cycles of

increased awareness and times of less fruitfulness which resonate with the idea of dynamism.

### **Action**

Action was a common theme amongst the participants, who described to varying degrees that spirituality was as much about active works to advance God's purposes as about the development of the inner self or relationship with God. Participant 24 felt it was not all about inner development; "it's not the up-building of your own spiritual life and I would want to be very, very, very clear about that", though he also described the importance of the growth in his own spiritual wellbeing, whilst Participant 5 thought of it in terms of reciprocity, with an obligation to act, for example needing to speak up for others when they were wronged, and Participant 10 was clear that spirituality was ultimately for others, which Participant 24 expressed in terms of responding as Christ would have responded. Participant 14 expressed a similar intention by directing all that she did for Jesus.

This is significant as much of contemporary spirituality deals with the development of the inner life and Heelas and Woodhead for example describe the *Subjective Turn* in terms of leading towards wholeness of the individual. Workplace spirituality also considers the enhancement of the individual and the possible benefits which that enhancement may have on business, rather than a direct 'spiritual call

to action'. So, as we have seen, contemporary spirituality is often focussed on meaning-deriving systems for the benefit of individuals, whereas our case study indicates that in the Archdiocese and, by extrapolation, the Christian tradition, the focus is on developing a relationship with Christ, which incorporates a distinct character of concern for others. Within Celtic Christianity, including Scottish Celtic Spirituality, we have noted that the tradition was largely oral and thus carried within a community whilst also being deeply connected with nature. Within wider Christendom examples of concerns for others are expressed by Benedict, Ignatius, Mother Teresa and Merton, all of whom offer examples of spiritual practices that are uniquely Christian and focussed on service in the world. So this study identifies within its context an expression of contemporary spirituality that is different to others.

### **Threads**

Threads are those elements that interconnect themes and are central to the way in which participants derive meaning from spiritual experiences. This experience is personal, so we must remain vigilant to the possibility of uniqueness, whilst seeking resonance and universality rather than sameness or commonality between or amongst narratives.

## **Identity**

All the participants, directly or indirectly indicated that Roman Catholicism was an important source of identity. Participant 24 stated “I have a strong sense of my identity as a member of the Catholic Community” and Participant 5 described herself as a “cradle Catholic”, which is an interesting depiction, alluding not to membership of an institution but of belonging to the family of God and the Roman Catholic community as a birthright received through an institutionally performed rite. We will consider in Chapter 7 the distinction between an essentialist view of identity as fixed and a non-essentialist position as being fluid. In this context the notion of birthright and identity rooted within the Roman Catholic Community is suggestive of a fixed form of identity, reinforcing concepts of belonging. On this basis identity operates as a thread, interconnecting and enhancing themes of community, belonging and openness and aiding an understanding of self and community thereby influencing the interaction of self with ‘my’ community and the extent to which ‘my’ community influences ‘my understanding’. Examples are Participant 14 describing her theological knowledge as that taught by the Roman Catholic Church but stating that she also knew it “in my bones” or Participant 24 stating “my beliefs are only my beliefs because they are the beliefs of the Church.”

Identity also operates in relation to the private self and the public self as well as the development of behaviour conforming to internal

standards rather than external expectations, which connects identity to themes such as authenticity, action and freedom. Accordingly, identity has a strong influence on a person's views of their life-world by facilitating an interaction between community and freedom, thereby offering the possibility of a closer relationship with God and an avenue to action.

### **Roman Catholic Church**

There is an apparent differentiation between the Roman Catholic Church as an institution and the community known as Roman Catholic which holds the institution as crucial and in high regard. Participant 5 described the institution as providing a structure that underpinned her life whilst Participant 10 regarded it as “big church”, the “original church” in which she could “hold it all together.” Participant 14 described the Institution as having provided a structure around which she understood the world and Participant 24 described his beliefs as reliant on the beliefs of the Institution.

We noted earlier the function of the Roman Catholic Church in terms of governance, teaching and presiding over the sacraments or liturgy. Although the institution and community are often viewed as one by outsiders, we have noted that the participants appear to differentiate between them. This is helpful in addressing issues surrounding spiritual experience as it separates the ‘authority’ from the ‘individual’, offering

the individual greater freedom for discovery and experience. The institution closely guards and administers the Eucharist which was fundamental to all participants, but there was never any suggestion or desire that its consecration ought or could be by anyone other than a priest ordained by the institution. Accordingly the participants had an expectation that one of the most important aspects of their lives be governed and available solely through the priest and therefore through the institution, not the community. The institution, which was not elected by the community, carried authority in terms of governance, teaching and liturgy which was accepted by the community, whilst not all teachings might necessarily be accepted by all members. The institution offers structures such as theology and the Mass, which assist in the formation, integration, cohesion and continuity of community and identity, offering participants a means of interpretation and giving meaning and purpose to their lives whilst being sufficiently flexible as to sustain a wide range of personal views.

### **Liturgy & Devotions**

The liturgical structures were helpful, particularly the sense of praying with and as the whole church. This unity was particularly noted by a number of participants who followed the Divine Office. Participant 5 described the liturgical year in terms of seasons. For another the Rosary was important because it was like the liturgy in miniature. Mass

was especially important to all participants, who felt it brought them closer to Jesus. Participant 9 felt it was a personal response to Jesus' call in the Last Supper. Many felt it was about meeting with God or being in close communication with Him. Participant 14 described Mass as returning to the crucifixion and feeling present, as part of a unification of all persons at the same time. All participants found the Mass to be a source of empowerment, thus operating both at the relational level, energising the dynamics of their spiritual journey, as well as facilitating their action in the world. In the offering of the Mass there arose a sense of community, not exclusively with those participating, but also and separately offering a sense of unification with all.

We noted that ritual was a means of conveying meaning through structured activities, facilitating personal and social transactions often being enacted. Symbolism, which in its practice creates community, offers access to the most profound areas of human experience, with symbols capable of mediating meaning. And so we observe this thread facilitating the development and interaction of theology, community, belonging, freedom, action and relationship with God.

Other liturgies and devotions such as Benediction had been influential to some participants and a number regularly attended Benediction in addition to Mass. For Participant 14 it "really did impress me very deeply." Some participants described participation in other

customs such as novenas, Rosary and the Divine Office, which seemed to engender a sense of both commitment and unity through common prayers at specific times. The Rosary was also used to pray together in informal gatherings, where some found it also helped them to feel they were praying with the whole church. It seems that the ability to draw on a commonly used, traditional devotional act was very helpful.

### **Prayer**

Prayer was central to the spirituality described by the participants as a means of communication and relationship with God. The format of prayer, whether formal, informal, through devotional acts, contemplative prayer or otherwise varied significantly but all participants reported finding prayer highly significant and deeply personal. Participant 9 spoke of prayer in both his parish and the Charismatic Movement, but also that it was only through prayer and the Mass that he felt he could contact God. Participant 10 described being with a religious community at prayer at 3 am as an opportunity to pray for and share in the sufferings of others. We noted previously that community prayer was an important focus and this is echoed by the participants.

We also noted previously the relational nature of prayer between God and an individual, with some participants stating that they felt



closer to God during times of greater praying. As Wright noted prayer could be described as “life with the living God” (Wright 1993: 775). For all of these participants, none of the themes could operate without prayer and in particular themes such as authenticity or freedom would not become apparent or recognised.

### **Family and Friends**

The influence of family and friends was important in influencing themes such as belonging and community, in which relationships with these groups was significant. This thread is distinct from themes such as belonging and community, as not only does it influence them but it operates by influencing individuals’ sense of belonging, community, etc. Community is a place in which a sense of commonality and sameness develop, leading to a sense of security and acceptance working in identity formation, whilst belonging is more focussed on close relationship development where family and friends appear to be very active.

This thread also operates to create loci for seeking themes such as freedom, authenticity and action because of the opportunity to seek a relationship with God. A number of participants noted such a relationship needed to be sought, and may be encouraged or discouraged within this context. An example of the influence of family and friends is in the use of the term “cradle catholic”, which carries

within it the notion of nurturing from a very young age. Participants 14 and 24 describe attending Mass with their families from a young age and the influence their family had on their life-world. Participant 5 described conversations with friends taking place within the informal family setting in a home. Participant 9 spoke of praying daily with his wife. So we noted the active influence of family and friends on the spiritual experiences of participants, especially in respect of being part of a community and of belonging. It appears therefore that not only being part of a community or sense of belonging is important, so are the interpersonal relationships that offer vitality for spiritual growth.

### **Purpose**

All participants declared that spirituality had and was for a purpose. Participant 5 described it as what defined her, underpinned her life, giving a context in which she could understand her life-world and from which perspective she acted. Participant 9 shared the sense of it being central to his life and directional, whilst Participant 10 most sharply defined spirituality as “ultimately for others.” Participant 14 felt that a secular life was unsatisfying, leading her to a religious vocation and Participant 24 described purpose in seeking to “accompany Christ to carry his cross in labouring for the redemption of the world.”

Spirituality involves authentic living, which within the Christian tradition involves a relationship with God, which relationship is

continually developing and has been described as dynamic by the participants and by writers such as Truran (Truran 2000, 68). Purpose therefore serves as a force in maintaining the dynamism of spirituality and drawing persons towards action.

### **The Notion of Gift within the Case Study**

Previously we considered the concept of reciprocity, founded largely on the work of Mauss, which essentially proposes that gifts made which were *ex facie*, free and voluntary, were in reality obligations that bound communities together and demonstrated status. This case study is located within spirituality and we are interested in how reciprocity may be applicable within the spiritual practices but not how it may be theologised, though we may need to make reference to Roman Catholic Church teaching to assist contextualisation.

All of the participants described both reciprocity as well as an apparent voluntariness. Participant 5 most clearly expressed this by describing it as a return from God for following him and the other participants, in other ways, described how they felt the need to respond to God because of His love for them and the benefits or graces that He gave to them. In this way we observe an obligatory nature in the participants as a grateful response to their experience of God and thus feeling obliged to undertake devotional and practical actions as a worshipful response to which God calls them. All the participants

described the importance of Mass in terms of meeting with God and receiving from God. However Mass is also about offering worship to God and so we can interpret Mass as involving a form of reciprocity in which, though voluntary, in some regards the expression of gratitude conveyed through the Ritual is founded on the knowledge of its acceptance and return of grace from God to the individual, and falls within a reciprocity model.

Participant 24 made an interesting differentiation between devotional and spiritual practices, where devotional practices were focussed on giving people a greater sense of God whereas spiritual practices promoted a desire to contribute to the work of advancing God's kingdom. We can perhaps interpret this important distinction from the case study more generally to ascribe to 'devotional practices' those activities that offer worship and express gratitude to God or otherwise heighten the awareness of the individual's relationship with God and take place, generally but not exclusively, within a community setting, such as Mass or Benediction, as well as prayers where there is a sense of unity in knowing the same prayers are being said throughout the world. Some devotional practices such as prayer, meditation and fasting could also be private however; for this participant these are 'spiritual practices', more individually focussed and, whilst directed at the relationship between the individual and God, more concerned with the individual's role in advancing God's kingdom, which includes the

development of the person towards greater authenticity as well as practical workings. Thus, for example, Participant 5 describes the need to support a colleague if she felt it appropriate and Participant 9 would do what he felt God was calling him to do even if he didn't know why. Thus we may see devotional practices in terms of praise and worship to God and spiritual practices involved in living out the challenge of Christian living and God's call to each individual.

We noted previously Part 3, Section 1, Chapters 1 - 3 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church as a context within which to understand reciprocity for this case study. Whilst not considering the theological content it is important to note how all the participants who relied on the teachings of the church, whilst remaining cautious of over-reliance on theology, felt it important to know what they believed. Those raised in Catholic families have had their life-world formed from understanding through this context. Chapter 1 of the catechism details that it is each person's freedom to seek the path leading to the Kingdom of Heaven<sup>62</sup>. However an individual is responsible for his own spiritual growth through conformity to his moral conscience and God, and essentially must actively direct himself to the fulfilment of the Beatitudes in which are rooted the goal of human existence<sup>63</sup>, which idea describes the journey to authenticity. So we can interpret a

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<sup>62</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church (2000) London: Burns & Oats p384

<sup>63</sup> Ibid pp383-386.

correlation between the operation of reciprocity and the pursuit of authenticity. Freedom is described as the power, rooted in reason and will, to perform, or fail to perform, deliberate actions for which the individual is responsible and which shapes their life<sup>64</sup>. In the case study we observed freedom as an important theme, albeit in the context of not being weighed down by more practical concerns and having greater trust and confidence in God.

We also noted how *Gaudium et Spes*, the pastoral constitution of the Roman Catholic Church in the modern world, spoke of a reciprocal relationship between an individual and God which, though voluntary, in the sense of one coming to God, involved a process of receiving from God, accepting that gift but then giving to the world. We can interpret a similar scheme within the case study where the participants describe spirituality as being for others, or for the advancement of God's work in the world.

However whilst we can interpret the operation of the Gift motif within the case study it is interesting how this may operate specifically in respect of the differentiation between devotional and spiritual practices. Within devotional practices such as liturgy and prayer, we can observe a correlation between the model of reciprocity and these practices through examples of the participants being given and accepting forgiveness, guidance and relief from worry, however the

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid p388

obligation to praise God and to live in a prescribed way is apparent though initially it appears also as voluntary. Furthermore this often, though not exclusively, occurs with a communal setting. In contrast spiritual practices are more focussed on the direct relationship between the individual and God, involving the development of the self for the purposes of outer action and involves practices beyond ordinary practices such as attendance at Mass on a Sunday. The participants' descriptions can be interpreted as being based on a desire to follow God in voluntary ways other than ordinary observances with the participants actively seeking a connection with God for spiritual development because they wish to do so, with less emphasis on any obligatory dimension.

### **Findings from the case study**

The participants comprised a lay female, a lay male, a female convert who had formerly been ordained, a female religious and a male religious who was also an ordained priest and thus provide a variety of experiences. It is interesting that in terms of spirituality, although how that spirituality is expressed can be quite different, there is a consistency in their descriptions. The purpose of the case study was to enable the consideration of hermeneutic phenomenology as a methodology to study spiritual experience from the developing discipline of Spirituality, rather than be a full study in its own merits.

The study itself investigates contemporary spiritual practices within a traditional religious structure with falling membership against a backdrop of increasing interest in spirituality and as such is a valid and important topic.

All the participants described how they felt deeply attached to the institution and especially the Roman Catholic community from which they drew meaning to understand their life-world. The institution was particularly helpful in being a repository of knowledge, which they felt they did not need to fully understand, trusting such knowledge resided in and was available in the body of revealed truth comprising the Scriptures and traditions of the Roman Catholic Church, as well as the locus for rites and customs which enriched their lives. Being part of Roman Catholicism not only offered community and a sense of belonging but a sense of a unity through the use of the same liturgy and prayers which the participants felt to be important and which were being said at all times throughout the world. However spirituality as described by the participants was not limited to the observance of rites and ordinances but was deeply personal.

Each participant described how spirituality was deeply individual for them, describing it in terms of their relationship with God which practically and directly influenced how they viewed the world and their place in it, their identity, and how they acted in the world. Spirituality provided a purpose and direction within a context that gave assurance



and acceptance, enabling them to become more authentic. In this regard their description of spirituality is similar to the descriptions of contemporary spiritualities, with a focus on authenticity, openness and freedom but differs by having concern for others and action in the world rather than simply inner personal development. It is clear that devotional practices are an essential part of this form of spiritual expression, however a spiritual element can be interpreted as being distinct, the traits of which may be observed to differentiate between adherents and those purposefully striving for spiritual development. Thus it is possible to perform devotional practices without spiritual practice. The spiritual practices are founded on the devotional practices, offering worship to God and additionally having an outward focus to the world, which develops authenticity, freedom and openness for the individual.

The context of each individual was interesting and demonstrated the need to contextualise the narratives. An example was Participant 5 who described a very close affinity to her family, her ancestry and how that influenced her identity. In examining the history of Irish Catholics in Scotland we found circumstances of persecution and isolation which necessarily led to very close community and solidarity amongst Roman Catholics who were in turn supported by the Church. These circumstances endured for a significant period and by applying the narrative of Participant 5 to this context we can reach an interpretation

to better understand her sense of identity rooted within family and Roman Catholicism.

The participants acknowledge that spirituality involved being open to God's calling and responding to it by following Christ. Participant 9 stated that for him spirituality was about constant change and the theme of dynamism has been further drawn out. We find similarities between the descriptions by the participants and Michel de Certeau who also speaks of the Christian vocation as being founded less on authority and more on following Christ. Moreover de Certeau speaks of journeying which is a metaphor that could be applied to the participants' narratives, especially in reflecting on Church teachings, the potential for God to be found in all things and spiritual experience being seen as highly personalised, making spirituality experientially based. De Certeau therefore helps us to interpret the participants in terms of openness to God rather than simply adherence to teachings as part of an experiential spiritual life. We can observe the applicability of de Certeau's train metaphor in which the individual can seek their own relationship located within the overarching strategy of the train, or institution, which describes an individual's experientially based relationship with God at times taking precedence over church teachings, whilst the institution remains indispensable.

Spirituality within the Archdiocese differs from devotional practices in terms as described but also by virtue of its individuality.

Although each participant described spirituality and spiritual practices in similar ways and with similar outcomes, the advancement of God's kingdom was always individually focussed on their relationship with God, their purpose and their sense of authenticity. Arising from this was a sense of freedom from practical problems leading to a deep sense of freedom, peace, of being loved and cared for, with a resultant universal expression of outward, active action. These senses were verified and justified by experience, which was an active component in deepening faith and understanding. We can interpret the cumulative effect as a dynamic process of spiritual development, manifested through a deeper relationship with God and greater authenticity within a freedom paradox of becoming free in order to be free for God's call.

Spirituality in the Archdiocese is similar in many respects to other forms of expression of contemporary spiritualities, but located within a Roman Catholic context, and the participants understanding is of an ongoing active process towards greater authenticity to fulfil a specific purpose bound within a reciprocal relationship with God and involving outward action and not only inner development. The spiritual experiences of the participants in this study are unique from other experiences and are rooted directly in their experiences of God rather than in theological understanding or knowledge and, significantly, although each participant's context was appreciably different, there remained identifiable traits amongst them all. This is a further

significant finding, as is the identified similarity between spirituality within this case study and forms of contemporary spirituality described elsewhere, because the similarity demonstrates resonance in spiritual experience and by extension the significance of spirituality as a distinct discipline.



## **INTERLUDE**

In Part One we considered spirituality as a contemporary phenomenon and the place of experience within it as a locus from which a greater understanding of it could be obtained. In doing so we considered the position of experience within spirituality as well as the academic study of this area and in particular how hermeneutic phenomenology, which has been applied successfully to the study of experience in other fields, might offer a methodological approach for the study of spiritual experience. In Part Two we undertook a limited case study applying hermeneutic phenomenology to a study about spirituality based on individuals' spiritual experiences and applied the study in particular to Gift theory. In Part Three we will consider theoretical foundations necessary for the study of spirituality from an experiential perspective and the extent to which hermeneutic phenomenology is suitable and compatible with the area, having regard to the practical application in the case study.



## **PART THREE**

### **Theoretical considerations**





## **Chapter 7**

### **A Framework for Hermeneutic Phenomenology and the Study of Spiritual Experience**

#### **Introduction**

Our objective is to assess the extent, if any, to which hermeneutic phenomenology as a methodology located within the academic discipline of Spirituality may assist us in understanding an individual's spiritual experiences as a means to greater understanding about spirituality, accepting that such experiences are highly personal and located within the context of an individual whose conceptions of reality may involve relational processes between the individual and another transcendent essence, which could vary across a wide spectrum of understanding, from 'God' to an 'inner self'. Accordingly, the framework within which hermeneutic phenomenology must operate for the study of spiritual experience is required to address issues of objectivity and subjectivity, of truth, of notions of reality and of concepts of context. To do so we need to consider a philosophical base on which our theoretical framework may rest. Spirituality's manifestation and growth comes principally through experience (Schneiders 2005, 1), which involves presentation of phenomena within a lived reality which need to be understood within a philosophical framework which

illuminates phenomena and so requires both a concept of Being or reality and a theory of knowledge derivation. The epistemological aspect will be considered in the next chapter. Here we will consider the notions of reality and being within which spirituality can be understood. As we observed throughout the case study, the actual spiritual experience, whilst considered real by the participant, is not readily assessable or verifiable, compared to the experience of a holiday for example, where the location and factors providing context could be more objectively verified. In spirituality the experience is real for the person but there is no independent corroboration, thus making the findings more subjective.

Metaphysics is the study of the fundamental nature of reality (Craig 1998a, 338) and ontology is the study of the ultimate nature of being (Craig 1998b, 117). The consideration of metaphysics/ontology within this study is helpful because of its spiritual perspective with the multiple assumptions contained therein. Issues such as consciousness, perception and identity form elements of metaphysics and so must be noted and considered whilst acknowledging the nature of spiritual phenomena and their juxtaposition with reality, of which we may, or may not, be conscious.

Krikorian notes of metaphysics that there may be “hidden reality” beyond human experience and thus not empirically verifiable, with the function of metaphysics being to offer generalised understanding and

generic traits of existence (Bronstein, Krikorian and Weiner 1972, 551) Whilst Guyer suggests that for Kant space, time and conceptual thought arise in human thought and understanding and are grounded in experience (Guyer 1998, 297-298). Experience can be a critical component, providing insight to a partially hidden reality. So, notwithstanding the potential for such hidden reality, a framework which provides a mechanism through which a narrative can be woven, in order to provide a description of an experience not necessarily empirically verifiable but nevertheless perceivable and validated through resonance and identification (Swinton and Mowat 2005, 47), and which offers further insights into such experiences, is valid and important.

Two opposing philosophical stances pertinent to this study are Idealism and Materialism, to which we now turn.

## **Materialism and Idealism**

### **Materialism**

Materialism holds that the “ultimate constituents of reality are material or physical bodies” and therefore that reality is composed of physical bodies, the consequence of which is that all experiences, even qualitative experiences, are reducible to quantitative changes or physiological functioning (Stack 1998, 171), which, as such, is monist and thus opposes the notions of mind/body separation or the concept

of abstract objects (Stack 1998, 171). Democritus developed the systematic theory of atomistic materialism, whereby matter is composed of irreducible elements (atoma) which are indestructible and have no secondary qualities (Taylor 1998, 872-878), recognising the difference between perception of secondary qualities of a thing and its reality (Taylor 1998, 874). This view of reality claims that reality is to be found in the objective nature of the physical world.

### **Idealism**

Locke considered that the mind perceived nothing other than its own ideas, knowledge being real “only so far as there is conformity between our ideas and the reality of things” (Locke 1997, 499). Berkeley stated that the perception of an object is central to its essence (Craig 1998, 740), founding modern idealism, in which one can only become *aware* of material objects, leading to the notion that such objects are mind dependent, that “*esse* (being) is *percipi* (to be perceived)” (Simmonds 1998, 740). Hume proposed that there was no such thing as knowledge independent of experience that genuinely portrayed the world (Kemp 2006, 16) and Kant proposed that knowledge is largely determined by the activity of the mind, which assisted Hegel’s formulation of an idealistic position founded on the assumption of a “primary structure called reason,” holding that reason was reality (Horstmann 1998, 264-265).

Locke critiqued the Aristotelian mode of classification based on substance by suggesting firstly that the loss of some properties required for a thing to fall within *taxon* (e.g. for a human being 'reason') would result in that thing no longer being a member of that species, eg a human being developing Alzheimer's would cease to fall within the category human being (McCann 2002, 367). Secondly, that if a quality of a thing ranks as essential it does so only in relation to its nominal essence, which ties essential properties directly to nominal essences, which pertains to understanding and becomes thus arbitrary rather than determinative.

### **Spirituality and Materialism/Idealism**

Materialism is the foundation of the modern scientific approach, finding reality in that which can be physically tested and regarded as empirically constant, reliable and repeatable but as a paradigm predicates existence in terms of physicality, which is problematic when considering non-physical phenomena such as experience, especially spiritual experience which is unique, temporal and non-repeatable.

Idealism considers reality to be found in the mind, prioritising experience and cognition over physicality, setting a perspective of reality and existence within an imminent construct but thereby predicates existence solely on the function of the mind and thus denies anything unperceived, with the result that the existence of An-other is

dependent upon one's perception of it. Whilst the Other may not previously *for me* have "existed", nevertheless it may exist. Baggini and Fosl suggest a particular problem of mystical experience, which may also be applicable to spiritual experience, which is its unintelligibility, unreliability and inconsistency (Baggini and Fosl 2003, 200), acknowledging that "all experience seems to be interpreted" (Baggini and Fosl 2003, 61) with validity generally being given to experience through Kant's transcendental argument - "Given we have these experiences ... what must be the case for those experiences to be possible" (Baggini and Fosl 2003, 61). Therefore effectively it is not the experience that is problematic but our means of accessing and understanding same. Realism holds that the physical world is logically independent of the human mind (Foster 2000, 244), independent of our modes of discovery, with truth considered in terms of its correlation to fact and in contrast to antirealism which requires truth to be rooted in a clearly formulated theory of knowledge (Craig 1998, 115-119).

For our work, spirituality falls between idealism and materialism, because whilst not being physical it cannot be confined solely within the domain of the mind. However realism's independence of an object from human enquiry assists us in dealing with the location and character of spiritual experience, by holding truth in terms of "correspondence with fact" and the possibility of "recognition-transcendent facts" (Craig 1998, 116). We need to locate a framework

within which to validly explore the phenomenon of spirituality specifically from a perspective of experience. Such an approach demands a framework that, whilst not reducing phenomena to physical objects, simultaneously accepts objects as not purely within the mind. This directs us to consider possible constituents of a framework, in order to be able to assess current theories against these constituents to develop a sufficiently robust framework.

## **Section I**

### **Constituents of a Framework**

The purpose of the framework is to provide a construct in which spiritual experience can be understood and must therefore consider the elements of such as perception, awareness and consciousness, and thereafter factors affecting meaning development such as memory, knowledge and identity.<sup>65</sup> Whilst we need to examine what is understood by the term *truth*, aspects that constitute the rules or regulations of a practice cannot be part of the framework as different spiritualities are likely to be distinctly different.

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<sup>65</sup> Whilst identity, as an essential element of the self, is a constituent of the framework, community may not be relevant as it is not an essential element of the self and needs to be considered on the merits of each study. Likewise ritual and symbols will often be an important conveyor of knowledge and meaning, but are not essentially a part of spiritual experience. Not only will they be highly specific to each study they could potentially be absent and thus cannot constitute fundamental elements of our framework.



Objectivity and subjectivity refer to perspectives of the world where objectivity pertains to judgement that is “impartial, well grounded in facts and rises above the personal”, whilst subjectivity is “entirely rooted in one individual’s particular perspective” (Baggini and Fosl 2003, 161). It is worthwhile noting that a difference lies fundamentally in the concurrence of the judgements of more than one person and so objectivity and subjectivity may not be as clearly distinct as initially conceived, which inevitably has a bearing on concepts of truth. Miller helpfully notes that objectivity must be distinguished from agreement (Miller 1998, 73-75) and so objectivity for us implies agreement with impartiality and a foundation in facts, though facts relate to knowledge.

We begin at the beginning of experience: at the perception of a phenomenon.

### **Perception**

Crane notes “...it is through perception that the world meets our minds” (Crane 1992, 1), with which both Descartes and Aristotle concur, accepting that something corporeal cannot enter the immaterial mind (Spruit 1995, 353). Quinton states that phenomena are ordinarily private or subjective entities such as impressions, sense-data, etc. (Quinton 1975, 2), differentiating phenomena from unobservable objects that are somehow inferred (Quinton 1975, 2). Foster records three traditional theories of perception (1) *direct realism* by which the

mind has direct access to a physical world, independent of the mind and metaphysically fundamental, (2) *representative theory* in which there is mediation by something in the mind to present a physical object resulting in perception, and (3) *idealism*, whereby sense-experience takes priority over the physical world, being that which comes into direct perceptual awareness (Foster 2000, 1). Foster identifies a number of key elements: (a) *constitution* - a fact cannot be constituted by a set of facts containing it and others and often occurs as a relationship between two facts or a fact and set of facts; (b) *perceiving mediation*, where the perceiving of one thing is channelled through the perceiving of another and (c) *psychological mediation*, in which a person needs to be in a particular state in order to perceive, though that state itself does not perceive, for example meditation (Foster 2000,2-11). In the case study we saw how perception occurred in a variety of ways including through prayer, ritual and quietness, which were then recounted as occasions of a spiritual experience.

Perception need not be a mental “photograph” but an interpretation of an external object. The participants were clear that their experience was of an ‘external’ object, though such an object may not be material, such as an illusion or hallucination (Crane 1994, 3). The distinction between appearances and phenomena is that a phenomenon is an “articulated system of appearances” (Quinton 1975, 3). Husserl considered experience to be intuitively given in order to

form personal judgements, this 'being given' process warranting that there was something to judge (Siewert 2006, 84), which raises the difference between *positing consciousness*, in which judgement about existence occurs and *non-positing consciousness*, in which presentation may refer to an object but without needing an affirmation or rejection of the object's existence (Siewert 2006, 84), leading to "our indeterminate experience of what lies in the unattended (but still apparent) surroundings of what we are looking at" (Husserl 1982, s113).

Perceiving mediation proposes that an object, held as having been perceived, is in reality a perception together with a number of additional facts. For example, seeing an apple: what is perceived is a part of the surface of an apple at a point in time, not the whole apple nor its entire lifecycle but rather an image, together with a series of additional previously held facts, leading to the constitution of the perception of an apple (Foster 2000, 5). Prior knowledge and modes of understanding may contribute to these facts, or the way in which such facts are processed and which are inherent in the perception process. For example psychological mediation provides that different perceptions of the same physical item can occur, depending on certain psychological states (Foster 2000, 10-11). The realist or materialist position has difficulty supporting such a framework because it needs

the direct perception of the physical world (Foster 2000, 244-246) and cannot hold the same object as being different.

Neurologically there can be input without perception and preconscious processing (Vul and MacLeod 2006, 873). Loftus reports that only a minor portion of perceivable events are actually perceived, which creates the possibility that more is perceived than that of which one is conscious (Loftus 1992, 761-765), allowing us to understand perception as the initiation of a process initiated by an appearance, potentially but not necessarily leading to consciousness of that object, the process being dependent on capacity and reliance on previous knowledge, (experience, facts, etc) and influenced by temporal psychological states, which together render the interpretation of perception and consciousness subjective experiences. In the case study we observed participants describing Mass as a place of spiritual experience but it is also a rite experienced with considerable prior knowledge and may provide an alternative temporal psychological state (e.g. one participant described it as an "oasis"). Additionally there is a possibility that there is considerably more to an object than that perceived, which leads us to a concept of perception as a subjective process during which external events are transcribed into internal meanings by locating newly acquired phenomena within a pre-existing context. Let us consider this further by exploring intentionality and consciousness.

## **Consciousness and Intentionality**

Consciousness lies on a spectrum from “the totality of one’s mental life” to “one’s inner perception of one’s mental experiences” (Mohanty 2006, 70-71) and phenomenologically may be regarded as a notion of appearance, experience or conceptual thought (Siewert 2006, 78), though Brentano classified consciousness into different types of phenomena: presentations, judgements and emotions, all of which were marked by intentionality of a self-reflexive nature and thus inner perception (Brentano 1972, 88). Quinton clarifies the term ‘*phenomenon*’ such that it is applicable to sensible appearances and also to awareness of mental phenomena (Quinton 1975, 1) and Gennaro differentiates between awareness and consciousness, where it is possible to be aware of something “in some sense” but not be conscious of it, citing as an example a day-dreaming lorry driver progressing along a winding road where he must have been aware of the twists and turns though not conscious of them (Gennaro 1995, 5-6).

Brentano linked intentionality to mental acts and ideas of thinking, perceiving, believing etc, and Husserl modified the concept such that intentionality was the relationship between an object and subject by which the object came to the subject’s consciousness (Mohanty 2006, 70-71), though he accepted there could be experiences that were not intentional (Husserl 1982, s46). Siewert suggests that Husserl’s intentionality links an actual appearance to

potential further appearances, without which sensory experience would be without direction and thus non-intentional (Siewert 2006, 82), thereby considering truth as a temporal process (Mohanty 2006, 71) comprising concrete elements that remain after the suspension of judgement, placing the basis of experience of reality as largely mediated within consciousness (Siewert 2006, 83).

Merleau-Ponty's position is less objective, suggesting that whether dealing with sensory, emotional or intellectual consciousness there is a possibility of error and that our thoughts are reliant on perceptual and cultural backgrounds, reinforcing the need for contextuality, which position he supports with the example of two people viewing the same scene, sharing a living experience of that same world and history, through which they also communicate whilst denying ideal unity (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 472). Merleau-Ponty raises the significance of contextuality in practical phenomenology.

Phenomenal states are typically accompanied by qualitative or sensory properties, but there is the possibility of non-conscious phenomenal states which have no qualitative property as well as mental states intruding upon consciousness so as to direct attention away from other states (e.g. distraction) (Gennaro 1995, 8-9).

In appreciating the foregoing, intentionality can be understood as the active recognition of an object through its being drawn to an individual's consciousness, which occurs within a context from which it

attains meaning for the individual. In the case study we observed how participants described experiences but the descriptions were largely bound up within their context, thus affirming the position that whilst an object may be shared the understanding of it is unique. Therefore the process is immanent because it occurs within the mind and subjective, because the meaning is attached by the individual. Consciousness is the location from which an analysis of a phenomenon can begin, because it is the point at which a person can first offer a description. Husserl advocates that phenomenological analysis leads from this point to the appearance and on to the object, though Heidegger disagreed because, as Lavery notes, Heidegger held the individual and experience as co-existing, co-constituting and inseparable (Lavery 2003, 27). This is significant for our framework, because it is from the conscious materialisation of the hidden reality that we can commence, and because we observed in the case study how closely descriptions of experiences are intertwined with the individual's context. It also provides an ontological centring for the notion of Being as firstly rooted in the sense of self which is located within consciousness. Having progressed from considering the instance of the phenomenon and the limitations on perception and consciousness to assist in understanding this contextualisation process, we need to consider the impact of memory and knowledge on the transition from intentionality to meaning.

## **Experience, Memory and Knowledge**

Lived experience as a relationship with a presence, regardless of being conscious of it (Jay 2006, 91), has been the subject of considerable debate. Husserl was concerned principally with experience and truth (Moran 2000, xiii), arguing that experience could be the immanent location of truths, thereby providing access to ideal truths and objective, non-contextual meanings through an evidentiary system seeking the logos in phenomena, permitting the transition from subjective temporality to ideal truth rather than a process of deductive reasoning (Jay 2006, 93). This position was challenged by a number of scholars such as Derrida, who suggested that phenomenology believes that "...all experience is the experience of meaning" (Derrida 1976, 61) and more specifically by Foucault, on the basis that it was "basically a reflexive examination of any aspect of daily lived experience in its transitory form" (Foucault 1991, 31). In our approach we are assessing whether hermeneutic phenomenology can assist in the study of spirituality, seeking to better understand experience not in a transitory form but contextualised, so we can see how meaning is attached to the experience. Experiences may contain elements that are both private and of a quality that cannot be conveyed to another, such ineffable qualities being "*qualia*" or individual instances of subjective experience (Troscianko 2005, 3).



Although knowledge differs from Being within spirituality they can be greatly entwined, making it difficult to separate them, especially as experience is something one appropriates to oneself and which occurs according to its essence (Jay 2006, 98). Heidegger helps by aiding an appreciation of what is understood by experience and, in particular for our study of spirituality, through highlighting how spiritual experiences must be explored at the individual level where fundamental aspects can be discerned.

Husserl's sought to progress from temporal and relative to ideal truths through intentionality because intentionality is the link between the full consciousness of an experience and the phenomenon (Siewert 2006, 82), though there is a difficulty within spirituality in attempting to access ideal truths because of the contextualisation of the individual and their experience, which involves memory.

Memory is central to all aspects of life, not only by being a repository of information and knowledge but also because it influences current thoughts, understandings and actions (Foster 2009, 3). Merleau-Ponty signposts memory's fundamental influence: "When we come back to a phenomena, we find as a basic layer of experience a whole already pregnant with irreducible meanings: not sensations with gaps between them into which memories may be supposed to slip" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 25), which essentially describes an experience as falling within a pattern of knowledge already present rather than a

phenomenon taking priority and memory functioning to complete the understanding of the experience so far as possible. As we have seen in the case study, we need to take careful account of how an individual describes an experience in order to understand it and so we need to acknowledge the role of memory in contextualising the phenomenon as part of the experiential process.

A framework for understanding spirituality must recognise the importance of the dualist nature of spirituality, in that it is focussed on something other, which, following Heidegger, must both be of an active nature and allow the object to reveal itself, whilst allowing for the possibility of *qualia*, especially accepting that it may not be possible to ascribe meaning to all aspects of experience. Experience is relational in nature in that the experience is a relationship with *an-other* and provides an “unfolding” about reality for that individual and a sense of what reality is.

Spirituality is located between the objective reality of ‘other’ and the subjective experience of that ‘other’, placing a burden on the notion of ‘truth’. In remaining neutral about the possibility of an objective reality (such as the existence of God) we cannot deny the possibility that part of such an object appears or is reflected in the subjective experience and so the framework must be capable of holding together this tension. Husserl’s concept of bracketing, whereby consideration of intangible issues can be suspended, permitting acceptance of the

objective element in order to explore the substance of the subjective experience, becomes significant to our framework.

### **Truth**

Truth is *ex facie* a difficult concept which carries an impression of absolute rightness, but Rorty suggests that truth can vary depending upon the type of knowledge and the situation, and in particular that truths are often compartmentalised because they would not otherwise be reconcilable, such as an evolution lecturer who is a devout Christian capable of holding the truth of Biblical teaching and simultaneously the truth of evolution (Rorty 2000, 79). Rorty refers to James' conception of truth and knowledge in relation to function, rebutting truth as accurate leading to truth universally (Rorty 2000, 79). Nomothetic and ideographic knowledge differ, the former scientifically verifiable and the latter personal and unique, but may also constitute truth, as for the lecturer in Rorty's example above, and Rorty suggests that to limit truth to only that which is scientifically verifiable is to reduce truth to the product of a verification process. Thus truth can be held as an open constituent not necessarily needing to be verified or reducible. In the case study the importance of this stance became apparent where not only issues about God, which are neither verifiable nor assessable, arose but also with regard to each participant's understanding of God, their experiences of God and the meanings they derived from those

experiences. The same issues arise in other spiritual practices; however, importantly, hermeneutic phenomenology is capable of containing truth on this basis because of its reliance on the epoché and its ability to hold narratives as true for the participants.

### **Identity**

Identity may be viewed as a process of definition of the self by one's self and by others, which is vital as identity and self-conception enable a person to know who they are, how to act and what to think (Hogg and Vaughan 2005, 114), as well as enabling one to predict what others may think and do thereby permitting a dualistic relationship between self and social structures, offering knowledge which regulates and provides structures for human interaction (Hogg & Vaughan 2005, 114). A significant function of identity is to provide locus and connection between an individual and society (Woodward 1997, 14) with the human capacity for reflexivity facilitating the sense of self and from there identity (Hogg and Vaughan 2005, 114). Representation operates to offer meaning to our experiences, based on signifying practices and symbolic systems (Woodward 1997, 14) including emotions that are part of a process of self-understanding (Davies 2011, 67).

Locke introduced a notion of identity in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Locke 1997) and noted different means of

identity, including by substance and idea, personal identity being of the latter order and achieved through consciousness, especially sameness of consciousness (McCann 2002, 362-363) though Locke believed there was no requirement for spatio-temporal continuity in personal identity (Locke 1997, 296). Hume considered identity to be connected to ideas but neither sense impressions nor impressions of reflexion corresponded to the idea of self, which was like a collection of perceptions changing with inconceivable rapidity and in perpetual flux (Frasca-Spada 2002, 487).

Naming and meaning is ascribed by reference to defining characteristics accepted by human agreement and convention, which Locke described as “the workmanship of the understanding” and labelled “nominal essences” (McCann 2002, 364), which differ from the real essence of a substance. There is no epistemic access to real essences, so classification occurs by arbitrary, consensual decisions rather than by the discovery of facts that are determinative (McCann 2002, 366).

Berger suggests that legitimisation arises principally through living rather than thinking (Berger 1967, 41) so greater expectation of the possibility of phenomena may lead to an increased awareness and thus an increased likelihood of perception and so traditions, by focussing attention, may facilitate perception and consciousness.

We may understand identity for the purposes of hermeneutic phenomenology in the study of spiritual experience as a fluid, defining process, often operating in the meaning-developing procedures of our experiences by means of conscious association and dissociation, which ultimately gives meaning to our lives and our place in our life-world. This is observed in all of the participants in the case study.

### **Summary on Constituents of a Framework**

We have identified that experience can be both true for an individual and also subjective, that consciousness may be only a proportion of that which is perceived and that intentional perception needs to be applied to memory to derive meaning. An experience may be quite different from the original object of perception and necessarily different for each individual due to the way in which the object is perceived and contextualised. This leads us to a less verifiable concept of truth, placing greater emphasis on veracity by experience. In order to consider the framework underpinning hermeneutic phenomenology for the type of research contemplated we need to locate these constituents within a philosophical model that can provide validity. Phenomenology and existentialism have been closely associated and so it is useful to consider how existentialism may assist a theoretical framework for hermeneutic phenomenology as applied specifically to the study of spiritual experience.

## **Section II**

### **Existentialism**

The existentialist movement, founded on works by Kierkegaard and others, denies that life is necessarily meaningful or that there are absolute goals, instead focusing on the individual and advocating freedom, responsibility and authenticity (Wrathall and Dreyfus 2006, 4). Cooper describe humans as meaning-giving and authentic persons as those who “shape their lives through a set of values and interpretations which they have forged for themselves”, if necessary against social convention (Cooper 1996, 710-711), and Guignon proposes that existentialist freedom is rooted in “phenomenological description of our everyday lives” because in every situation there is in reality a choice where the individual is not compelled, though he will favour one choice over another (Guignon 1998, 497). Both theologians such as Tillich and Barth and atheists such as Sartre and Camus have adopted existential approaches (Wrathall and Dreyfuss 2006, 4), demonstrating the movement’s width.

Pascal considered that neither Greek philosophy’s objectivism nor Hebrew subjectivism were satisfactory in the sense that the human self was a synthesis of objectivism and subjectivism and everything in between (Pascal 1958, 98). With which proposition Kierkegaard concurred, but he advanced “despair” as a key element (Kierkegaard

1989, 54), caused by this very contradictory nature, and which could only be overcome by a defining commitment leading to despair, the means of its being overcome working co-operatively in relation to one another (Kierkegaard 1989, 51). Dreyfuss suggests many do not realise their despair because of distraction (Dreyfuss 2006, 141-144), such as being caught up in the mundane affairs of living, and that in seeking conformity to socially standardised norms, people are not aware of their freedom, leading to inauthenticity as they refuse to take responsibility for their own lives, failing to be true to “owning up to who you really are”, authenticity being essentially “a matter of lucidly grasping the seriousness of your own existence” (Guignon 1998, 498-499). This is important and helpful in the case study, where authenticity appears as a significant element, but may also invite attention to the purpose within the case study which is the assessment of hermeneutic phenomenology as a means of studying spiritual experience.

Buber suggested that relationship occurs in the meeting between “*I and You*,” (Martin 2006, 201). There may be considered to be three “*I and You*” relationships, being meetings where relationships occur: (1) with other conscious beings, (2) with nature and (3) with “spiritual entities” (Martin 2006, 203). Dostoyevsky saw self as comprising contradictory components for which a stand needs to be taken (Dreyfus 2006, 150-151), viewing God as an “ocean of love” (Dostoyevsky 1996, 358) whilst Nietzsche claimed that linking



Christianity with Platonism focussed the west on meaning. For him, ultimately, there is none, therefore by this approach, “*God is Dead*” (Nietzsche 1974, 181), leading him to call for a turning away from an “addiction to meaning” (Dreyfuss 2006, 156).

Existentialism was a response to idealism with criticisms of “subject-object dualism” and “cognitivist reductionism” (Tietz 2006, 162-163), because it is not possible to rationalise existence into purely intellectual terms (Jaspers 1970, 6). This understanding concurs with the basis of hermeneutic phenomenology so far already discussed. Heidegger considered that existence cannot be objectified (Tietz 2006, 166) and sought to differentiate essence from existence (Heidegger 1962, 67) by determining existence as being prior to essence, from which he sought to explore Being from a position of *Dasein*, which does not place truth as verifiable and objective and co-operates and supports our conception of ‘*truth*’.

Within the existential phenomenological approach the emotions are significant because they are as essential to our being as rationality and understanding but are also dependent on historical, social context and language factors (Solomon 2006, 291), which accords with our understanding of spiritual experience, particularly the distinction between the narrative of an experience and the object experienced.

Existentialism is helpful for holding in tension concepts of lived reality and truth, without needing to make judgments, allowing value to

be given to personal experience and the possibility of placing to one side questions of truth in order to explore the experience for the individual. This aspect of a framework enables any aspect of spiritual experience to be examined, not only those within a theoretically complex structure (such as theology). Even in relation to a Christian based study, we observed in the case study that the participants placed only a limited importance on theological matters. This emphasis on the individual complements our enquiry and acknowledges that an experience is greater than the narrative with the context of the individual, being highly influential in the conscious understanding of experience.

### **Section III**

#### **A Framework for the Study of Spiritual Experience**

In assessing hermeneutic phenomenology as a methodology for the study of experience within spirituality *as spirituality*, rather than from the perspective of another discipline, a framework must encompass a concept of reality within which the outcomes make sense. Fundamental constituents of a framework acknowledge experiences as highly complex, recognising that we do not become conscious of all that we perceive. There is 'input' of which we have no apparent knowledge and we must also account for the possibility of unconscious perceptions interacting with subsequent knowledge. This is a positive contribution

to the acceptance of the possibility of a 'transcendent other' which is immeasurable, yet needs to be accounted for in our framework. Perception is processed such that 'objects' of which one becomes conscious are placed within existing knowledge constructs to which meaning is attached. These meanings are therefore the individual's interpretation with regard to previous knowledge and experience, generating personal knowledge. Accordingly, one issue is the legitimisation of highly personal and individual concepts of life that are highly subjective. Another will be moving from 'refined' knowledge towards the meaning for the participant of the original object of that experience.

The personal nature of experience is personal in part because of the mechanism by which meaning is accorded. Identity and memory are critical in this contextualising process, where identity is involved in self-defining and memory is the source from which the comparison of '*what I know*' with '*what I experience*' proceeds to produce meaning. The recognition of how context informs meaning is central to a framework, underpinning hermeneutic phenomenology's application to spirituality. Rousseau states, "I know my own heart and understand my fellow man. But I am unlike any one I have ever met....I am like no-one in the whole world" (Rousseau 1971, 1), thereby describing reality as being perceived and understood differently by each person but with sufficient similarity to enable mutual understanding and shared lived

experiences. On this basis truth lies as that which is 'right' without needing to be reconciled with every other aspect of truth and reality is perceived as each individual's truth.

A hermeneutic phenomenological approach prefers practical reason to pure reason and an interpretative approach to understanding offers such a model. A framework that validly supports the application of hermeneutic phenomenology within the study of Spirituality could therefore comprise an existential/phenomenological understanding of reality and being, acknowledging the subjectivity of individual experience, the non-contiguous nature of truth within such an arena and accepting an interpretative component in understanding spiritual experience which acknowledges that the resultant understanding may remain incomplete due to the nature of the process of experience from perception through intentionality to knowledge and meaning.

### **Conclusion**

We have considered a framework which places experience central to an understanding of reality, whilst acknowledging the limitations on experience as a measure and description for that understanding and the resultant individualised concept of reality and being. Placing an emphasis on consciousness facilitates an examination of experience by accepting the individual nature of experience and permits holding truth as right but not necessarily

verifiable, contiguous or compartmentalised. The framework as discussed is capable of facilitating the application of hermeneutic phenomenology to the study of spiritual experience located within the discipline of Spirituality.

We now turn our attention to addressing the process of knowing, particularly what it is we know and how we come to know it: the epistemological basis of our project.

## **Chapter 8**

### **Knowing and Understanding in the Study of Spirituality**

#### **Experience**

##### **Introduction**

In Part One we considered the term spirituality and the significance of experience and in the previous chapter we considered essential characteristics of a framework for hermeneutic phenomenology as a methodology for studying spirituality, including: the difference between objects perceived and those objects as perceived; that knowledge derived from experience is processed so as to give meaning within the context of the individual, and truth as something that is not necessarily verifiable, contiguous and compartmentalisable. Having considered a theoretical framework within which hermeneutic phenomenology may operate in its application to spiritual experience from the discipline of Spirituality we need to consider the validity of an epistemological basis.

##### **Types of Knowledge**

There are two principal types of knowledge: nomothetic and ideographic, with nomothetic knowledge being derived from indefinitely repeatable events (Mautner 2000, 389) whilst ideographic knowledge is

private, particular and non-recurrent (Mautner 2000, 266-267), associated with each being a specific approach to research. Quantitative research produces “nomothetic” knowledge (Swinton & Mowat 2005, 40) by reduction to a series of rules or laws which are reproducible and remain constant. For example mixing the colours red and green will give yellow, irrespective of when, where and how this is done. Such laws are applicable to natural sciences where the object under study is immutable and thus replication and reliability are both feasible and relied upon as evidentiary of “truth”. Qualitative research produces “ideographic” knowledge (Swinton & Mowat 2005, 43), finding meaningful knowledge in unique, non-replicable experiences, producing less verifiable forms of “truth”. The forms of knowledge do not contest one another but rather apply in different situations and a person may accept both forms of knowledge as truth, for example Rorty’s evolution lecturer who is also a devout practising Christian accepting both the scientific truth of evolution and Biblical truth (Rorty 2000, 79). Swinton provides the example of a chemist’s nomothetic knowledge of truth in science, whilst holding equally true the ideographic knowledge of the truth of the love he bears to his wife (Swinton & Mowat 2006, 42). These examples illustrate the equal validity of both types of knowledge, albeit derived from significantly different origins. McLeod has suggested that qualitative knowledge can fall into one of three classes: (1) knowledge of the other, (2) knowledge

of phenomena and (3) reflexive knowing (McLeod 2001, 3). In assessing the applicability of hermeneutic phenomenology to the understanding of spiritual experience the subject matter draws on ideographic knowledge and therefore requires a qualitative approach. Hermeneutic phenomenology's primary purpose is to describe and interpret in an intelligible and potentially 'identifiable-with' manner aspects of experience in a non-judgemental way, having regard to individuals' life-worlds and their understandings of reality, which suggests hermeneutic phenomenology could be compatible with the subject matter, for example, as in the case study a belief in God, where the approach does not question the existence of God nor consider theological principals but looks specifically at the spiritual experience. A knowledge construct that will assist will be one that offers to impartially lay more open the subject of enquiry; phenomenology seeks to open the subject to view rather than explain it (Flynn 1994, 78).

In endeavouring to describe spiritual experience in a manner with which others may identify and resonate, hermeneutic phenomenology needs to contain an epistemological foundation that supports the construction of narratives which lay more open the unique aspects of spiritual experiences with which others are capable of identifying, and finding resonance whilst retaining validity and integrity with the original transcript throughout the process and in the final



conclusions, which brings us to consider phenomenology as an epistemology.

### **Phenomenology as an Epistemology for Spiritual Experience**

Phenomenology has been described as “the most important paradigm in the academic study of religions” (Flood 1999, 8). Although the first documented use of the term in 1764 was by Johan Heinrich Lambert, referring to the analysis of appearances and their determination as truth or error (Flood 1999, 91), the term *phenomenology of religion* was first used by Chantepie de la Saussaye in 1887 as a technique for a descriptive approach to studying religion (Kunin 2003, 116), affirming the significance of description at the outset of phenomenology. Based on Descartes notion of thought as the fundamental unit of reality, “*cogito ergo sum*” (Descartes 1997, 143), Hegel developed the idea by placing an emphasis on consciousness where the “self-knowing Spirit ... is the certainty of immediacy, or sense-consciousness” (Hegel 1977, 491) identifying the central position of consciousness within this approach, or as Flood states, “the immediate being of spirit” (Flood 1999, 92).

Chantepie de la Saussaye sought impartial and objective truth through ethnographic methodology (Cox 2006, 105-107), whilst Hegel sought knowledge of the world as it really was rather

than as it appeared to be (Singer 2000, 64) describing it in terms of “consciousness” (Hegel 1910, 90-103), which suggests a dual heritage of description and enquiry. Husserl dramatically advanced phenomenology through an investigation of consciousness and meaning, in an attempt to relocate from abstract concept to material or knowledge of the object to which the experience pertains (Macann 1993, 4).

Smart considers Husserl’s phenomenology to be a reductionist system, attempting to produce value-free descriptions of religion (Smart 1969, 21) and therefore an ultimately objective analysis of religion, whilst Macann asserts that, epistemologically, phenomenology performs without metaphysical presuppositions, by elucidating rather than explaining lived experiences (Macann 1993, 912). Moran describes the function of the epoché within phenomenology as treating immanence as something apart from the experience, leading to a move from immanence as within and transcendence as outwith, setting aside issues of validity to create a closer correlation between reality and consciousness (Moran 2000, 145). Flood connects Husserlian phenomenology with the phenomenology of religion by assigning bracketing with the notion of “proclaimed neutrality and objectivity”, reduction to essences with the taxonomy of religious phenomena and empathy with the “religious other” (Flood 1999, 97). Husserl claimed that the

consequence is a system of analysis which is both objective, through analytic reduction to recognised taxonomy, yet subjective, in that it derives from the consciousness of experience and meanings construed from past experiences (Moran 2000: 136), which is achieved by abstaining from determining the ontological status of the phenomenon (whether it is real) and separating the conscious representation from the issue of the existence of the object of that the stream to consciousness (Flood 199, 100), thereby suspending the need to determine the reality of the object of that appearance whilst allowing objective analysis of the “reduced” essence of the phenomenon. Husserl described this in an example regarding redness as:

“snip[ping] away any further significance of redness, any way it can be viewed as: something transcendental (e.g. the redness of a piece of blotting paper) ....And now I grasp in pure “seeing” the meaning of the concept of redness in general.” (Husserl 1964, 44-45).

Central to a phenomenological approach therefore is consciousness.

## Consciousness

Locke's conception of consciousness discerned between *acts of the body* and *acts of which one was conscious*, devising a concept of responsibility only for those acts of which one was conscious (Locke 1997, 307). Marx criticised this concept, holding that social relations preceded individual consciousness which in reality only masked social inequality (Marx 1977, 160-164), and Nietzsche also criticised Locke on the basis that consciousness was not part of an individual's existence but rather of one's social nature, operating as a means of help and protection (Nietzsche 1978, 197), emphasising a distinction between consciousness and reason by reference to the way in which reason enters into consciousness (Nietzsche 1978 197). Whereas Locke describes consciousness as immanent, Marx and Nietzsche describe consciousness as transcendent, though Nietzsche is partially sympathetic to an immanent stance by differentiating between reason and consciousness. The location of consciousness is important to the epistemological position because it functions within the process of knowledge-generation and understanding. In assessing an epistemology for hermeneutic phenomenology consciousness necessarily needs to be understood in terms of immanence because, although we observed in the case study the importance of community and belonging in aiding the spiritual

development of the individual, which differs from other themes and threads such as authenticity, *consciousness* of such an experience directly affects the actual spiritual development of the individual and is exclusively personal, without the need for a social context, leading us to the conclusion that spiritual experience is immanent, in that it is from within the individual and specifically within the individual's context, thereby supporting the contention of the immanent location of consciousness, where perception has been subjected to meaning from the context of the individual.

Husserl's epistemology considered that language was the medium of conveyance, drawing a distinction between the medium and that conveyed, though this may be overly restrictive in that language may only be necessary when communicating details of an experience to another using only verbal or written media, but not, for example, signs or gestures and would not be required in coming to an understanding about an experience exclusively within an individual (such as a "feeling"). Nevertheless it is appropriate to include this within the framework because the narratives of the participants are composed in language and it is with these narratives that others may interact. A further distinction arises between a statement as a fact or as a judgement, the difference between objectivity and subjectivity (Husserl 1970, 538). This difference can be attributed to a process of nomination, either

nominating presentations (facts) or positing presentations (judgements) (Macann 1993, 7), the process of nomination containing an objective reference which Husserl refers to as the “objectivating acts”, which confer meaning and are distinct from declarative sentences such as wishing, wanting, asking, etc (Husserl 1970, 37). This process is a means by which subjective elements of experience can become objective through classification and treated as nominating presentations, however such events can occur within the consciousness of the individual without the persons being conscious of the process. Blackmore highlights the difference between phenomenal consciousness, (i.e. subjective experience), and access consciousness (i.e. thinking, guided action, speech, etc), noting the key difficulty in consciousness is phenomenal consciousness (or phenomenality) because of its intrinsic nature, but she also helpfully highlights the significance of subjectivity in experience (Blackmore 2005, 7-8).

The criteria to which consciousness must conform to enable hermeneutic phenomenology to function for our study coincides with our epistemological understanding and highlights that although consciousness is understood as objective, it is often founded on a subjective origin. Awareness and consciousness are related to the extent that awareness is the “current experience”, whilst consciousness interprets same within the context of past

experience to endow meaning, as illustrated by Gennaro's day-dreaming lorry driver, and may have an explanation in Damasio noting that awareness facilitates a concern for one's own survival (Damasio 2000, 136-138). This corroborates our distinction between an initial subjective awareness and consciousness as a meaning-saturated experience, considered in terms of objectivity, but this contention implies a priority to consciousness through the immediacy of awareness being subjected to interpretation of the current experience by memory, which supports Locke's contention of "intentionality" by interconnecting perception and awareness with knowledge and past experience to establish consciousness, which is then laid as memory and advancing the experience by assigning to the apprehension the *veritas* of objectivity.

As noted within phenomenology, consciousness is comprised of various elements including "*intentionality*," (Flood 1999, 93), which means an object entering into consciousness or one being conscious of an object. Macann describes the relation between consciousness and intentionality as "an examination of the subjectively determined life of consciousness would be meaningless if it did not stand in relation to its intentionally determined objectives" (Macann 1993, 8), which leads to the distinction between the actual, the *noetic*, grounded in the idea of knowledge and the ideal, the *noematic*, grounded in the "content of

knowledge” (Husserl 1970a, 233). We thus find consciousness to be a meaning-laden product of a process in which experience is mediated by language, prior understandings and perception. In particular the way in which one actively comprehends an object, intentionality, is critical.

### **Intentionality**

Flood defines intentionality whereby “the central characteristic of consciousness is that it is conscious of something or is “intentional” (Flood 1999, 93) and Cox describes intentionality as “...the subject actively perceiving or apprehending an object” (Cox 2010, 27), highlighting the active directing of attention to an object rather than passive receipt and in so doing distinguishes it from perception. Macann notes Husserl’s acceptance of imagination as “indicative of the interiority of phenomenological analyses” (Macann 1993, 13).

Husserl differentiates experience (termed “passive genesis”) from an understanding of that experience (termed “active genesis”) (Husserl 1991, 77–78), suggesting that it is possible for the ego to identify the intentional constituents of experiential phenomena and trace back to the antecedent formations (Husserl 1991, 79), thereby acknowledging the need for contextualisation of phenomena, which Macann clarifies by distinguishing between the object which is



apprehended from the object as it is apprehended. Within a phenomenological investigation only the object as it is apprehended is relevant (Macann 1993, 11). An experience can be understood as the application of prior knowledge to the intentional object which, by virtue of being unique to each individual, results in subjectivity and is further compounded by the way in which the subject-matter under enquiry is experienced. Husserl's Phenomenology seeks objectivity by eidetic reduction, categorising phenomena so as to construct meaning (Flood 1999, 107). Without epoché and empathy Flood considers there can be no phenomenology of religion (Flood 1999, 97) or, by extension, spiritual experience. This form of reduction was a movement from individual to universality, to identify the essence of a phenomenon which was a process contained in consciousness (Moran 2000, 134). Cox suggests it is looking into the meaning of the phenomenon (Cox 2010, 29). Husserl's conception of this process can be understood in the context of Locke's abstraction of general ideas by which a "same kindness" or "essence" (Locke 1977, 374-375) could be identified in different objects. This "ideational abstraction" developed into Husserl's "eidetic intuition" (Macann 1993, 10), leading to a notion of an ideal object, the function of which is the correlate of the meaning, giving activities of consciousness (Macann 1993, 10). That is, by examining the same phenomenon (e.g. within our case study the

Eucharist) from the understanding (or consciousness) of several individuals, using this intuitive method, one can identify original essences. Blum however considers that there is a difficulty in seeking essences in the phenomenological study of religions, with phenomenology's role being interpretative rather than explanatory, and that it is this interpretative role that sets it apart from social scientific or naturalistic approaches (Blum 2012, 1029). This is because, in seeking to identify meaning, phenomenology of religion, and by extension spiritual experience, needs to refer to supernatural qualities and thus must exclude naturalistic categorisation and explanation. However as the object of enquiry is experience, the positing of the existence of a transcendental phenomena is unnecessary and interpretation can proceed by application of the epoché (Blum 2012, 1031-1032). This approach favours hermeneutic phenomenology as an interpretative approach and provides a basis under which hermeneutic phenomenology could be applied to the study of spiritual experience.

The interplay of memory and perception is important and was described by Husserl with reference to an analysis with melody, particularly the process of *retention*: the ability to recall a melody played and *protention*: the anticipation of the melody. (Moran 2000, 138). Retention and protention occur in the present, Macann suggesting they operate to “extend the scope of the

present” (Macann 1993, 21) whereas *re-production* relates to historic acts and Macann uses the term pre-diction to define the opposite of memorial reproduction as being a ‘pre-view’ of memory (Macann 1993, 21). Subsequent recalling of the unity of the melody is attributed to the structures of retention and protention (Macann 1993, 22) with recall comprising both the anticipation of the following aspect of the melody (protention) and recall from memory thereof (re-production). This correlates with our previous chapter’s findings on perception, particularly the contention that perception fits into memory rather than memory fitting into perception, with the additional dimension of anticipation also originating in memory.

A significance which can be drawn from this is recall from memory: reproduction which is exclusively internal and called by Husserl “Secondary Remembrance” (Husserl 1971, 57-59). Here, reproduction is differentiated from *phantasy* on the basis of the former locating the event in time, the latter having no connection with the past, however phantasy does involve an actuality of representation (Macann 1993, 21-23). Sartre refutes Husserl’s notion of relations between consciousnesses, accepting only relations between retention and protention, “internal assimilations” and motivations (Sartre 1972, 56), illustrated by describing the figure of eight drawn in the air with a finger “the loops remaining there luminously for moments after my finger has completed its

trajectory” (Sartre: 1972, 149). He formulated that consciousness of a sign functions by directing attention without dependence on actual existence (Moran 2000, 183). Sartre’s idea is helpful to us because it displaces a requirement to consider existence and so works with the epoché. In studying spirituality, phenomena described or identified are likely to comprise both “current” objects and objects drawn from memory, where reproduction may be time situated, such as a particular event, or it may not be a conception of historical events: there may be both *secondary remembrances* and *phantasies*. The correlation between retention/protection processes, together with the adaptation of original objects by memory of previous experiences during the process of internal assimilation highlights significant aspects of objects through their less varied expressions compared to the variety of expressions of less-significant objects, so aiding identification of universalities. Notwithstanding the variety of expressions, significant elements of phenomena or characteristics thereof may be identifiable. Cox notes that part of the process of objectification in Husserlian based phenomenology is the correlation of one individual’s consciousness with other persons’ consciousness’ of the same object by intersubjectivity (Cox 2010, 31) and so it is important to consider the concept of intersubjectivity, especially with regard to its importance to objectivity, though the proposition of reaching ideal

essences which requires connection to reality is difficult because in spiritual experience the phenomena is located within a complex context, whereas suspension of judgement or reality through the epoché allows an interpretation of the narrative without recourse to reality.

### **Intersubjectivity**

Intersubjectivity is the experience of other egos, alter egos and generally that which could be considered as “other,” (Moran 2000, 175), or “...a living relationship and tension among individuals” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 260) and involves accepting the reality of others through a form of empathic understanding and recognition of cognition of other persons, through which empathy one person can enter into another’s cognitions by cultivating a feeling for them (Cox 2010, 31). Husserl considered that this occurred through “a peculiar kind of epoché” (Husserl 1991, 93) by which all other effects of intentionality relating to another’s subjectivity were bracketed out. The phenomenon is regarded from the perspective of “*I-alone*,” (Husserl 1991, 93) and is necessarily based on the assumption that the same reality is experienced (Cox 2010, 31).

A consequence is the creation of a community in which individual egos perceive themselves and others, with the individual

capable of perceiving for others as for oneself with a network of perceptions, forming a phenomenological system in which phenomena could be understood from a variety of perspectives based on social acts (Flood 1999, 110).

Bakhtin questions this, contending:

“consciousness of other people cannot be perceived, analysed, defined as objects... (we) can only relate to them dialogically. To think about them means to talk with them; otherwise...they fall silent” (Bakhtin 1984, 68).

Steinbock argues transcendental experience of the other through intropathy is “transcendental silence” (Steinbock 1995, 74). Importantly in assessing hermeneutic phenomenology for studying spiritual experience, the influence of the “other” is problematic because the other’s understanding and description of the phenomena is bound by their own contextualisation. This influence may take at least three forms: (1) we have noted that different people may experience the same event in different ways (2) the reflexive approach of a researcher and (3) the influence of another in the generation or description of the experience by that individual. Though the issue of that-within-me and that-external-from-me may be addressed in transcendental phenomenology, there is difficulty

in seeking objectivity because of the subjectivity at the core of this approach, but this does not limit the ability to interpret and seek universalities rather than essences.

### **Transcendental Phenomenology**

Husserl's transcendental phenomenology distinguishes between *immanence: within me*, or lived experience through perception, thought, imagination and memory (the *signification*) and *transcendence: outside of me* or the reality perceived (the *sign*) (Macann 1993, 17), where immanence is determined by an individual, based upon the evidence placed before them and assessed within their context, which masks the true nature of reality (Moran 2000, 136). This concept was reflected in Husserl's noetic/noematic relation of intentional acts with noetic (noesis) being the intentional drawing-to-consciousness of an object (an experience) whilst the noematic (noema) is the object of that experience (Flood 1999, 94). Husserl's transcendental process requires this transcendental boundary to be crossed, using an approach to minimise the tendency to interpret and apply preconceptions to the object (Moran 2000, 137), though Heidegger argues that this is not possible because all people are located within their own context and it is therefore impossible to remove all subjectivity. Husserl's approach involves an awareness of those

preconceptions to understand the context of an individual which in turn gives greater insight into such preconceptions, enabling their elimination, by using his threefold method: a bracketing or epoché, an eidetic reduction and the use of empathy, though the elimination of subjectivity in the study of spiritual experience appears unfeasible. Husserl referred to the epoché variously as abstention, unplugging and of “putting out of play” (Moran 2000, 147). Cox describes the epoché as a process in which prior judgments about truth are suspended so that the phenomena could be seen, rather than understood (Cox 2010, 49-51). Blum concurs that the epoché is important because, as Heidegger contends, theology is a function of faith and thus impossible without faith (Heidegger 1998, 45, 49-50). The epoché permits abstention from the issue of faith (Blum 2012, 1033-1034).

Husserl’s eidetic reduction was the process of identifying the universal reality from the individual’s description and involved the retracing from the individual’s meaning to the object of the experience, which was part of a universal reality (Moran 2000, 134). There is *ex facie* a potential difficulty for studying spiritual experience in seeking universal themes whilst accepting the uniqueness of individual experience. Heidegger disagreed with Husserl on this point, claiming that it was not possible to reach objectivity, a critical issue being the relationship between the object



which is the origin of the individual's conscious meaning and that meaning. Husserl's retracing from meaning to the object does not seem realistic in respect of spiritual experience having regard to the contextual complexity. We noted earlier the nature of truth and the validity of individual experience, so we must accord due weight to individual experience. Heidegger departs from Husserl with regard to how the eidetic reduction operates, through considering how an object reveals itself, moving from the phenomenon to the understanding of the phenomenon (Heidegger 1975, 29), it being *Dasein's* understanding of being rather than being (Boedeker 2005, 161) that is the subject of reduction, and therefore essentially interpretative and which offers a more feasible approach to studying spiritual experience, because interpretation seeks to draw out issues rather than present them as facts or provide explanations.

It is useful at this point to review our epistemological position thus far. We have acknowledged that experience begins with actively apprehended perception (whilst acknowledging that we do not become aware of all perceptions and not all perceptions lead to experience) of intentional objects, which with the application of memory leads to consciousness of the object and placing the intentional object within the already existing knowledge basis.

Husserl's emphasis on the ego fails to consider sociological factors that form the life-world of participants not drawn in through intersubjectivity, such as community history, which as we have observed in the case study is highly significant. Bakhtin and others valued dialogue as the way to understand ourselves and others and Flood notes a problem of ahistoricity in Husserl's approach and a contradiction of being at once removed from the life-world and simultaneously enmeshed in it (Flood 1999, 111). Gadamer states that, "the general structure of understanding acquires its concrete form in historic understanding" (Gadamer 1975, 234), which for spiritual experience involves both the context being utilised to understand an experience, which is likely to be both historical and dialogical through discussion with others, and the influence of sharing experiences and describes an approach based on interpretation.

Heidegger also contends that it is impossible to remove the context from the object and that, accordingly, the meaning ascribed is an interpretative process.

The "*philosophy of the sign*", the concept that language is central to understanding, being the "apprehension of the relation between the sign and what it represents" (Flood 1999, 100) is used by Flood to exemplify the ability to consider "real" and "fictional" objects by distinguishing meaning through representation, that is

*sign* from existence, thereby opening any appearance to consciousness as a legitimate area of enquiry (Flood 1999, 100). Meaning therefore may be obtained regardless of the existence or otherwise of the object. This view is supported by Blum (Blum 2012, 1033), albeit restricted to appearances capable of being reduced by that individual to language. Derrida has argued that language cannot “mediate” and thus not refer (Derrida 1978, 177) and Banerjee states “...the function of language is not to create anything, but to express and especially to communicate something or other” (Banerjee 1963, 17). Thus language acts as an imitation, but not an origin (Flood 1999, 101), giving rise to possibly an incomplete representation of the consciousness of the object. Furthermore, there is a risk that the communication process may oversimplify and possibly mislead (Banerjee 1963, 17) because language is only useful to the extent of individuals’ understandings and language skills.

Bakhtin states that consciousness only operates once it has content and only in the process of social interaction, with signs emerging through that social interaction (Morris 1994, 52), whilst Gadamer states that it is only through conversation with the other that we are really able to begin to exhaust the possibility of understanding a text or experience. Within spiritual experience the possibility of interaction with the transcendent Other as a conscious

being cannot be discounted, though the individual experiencing such experience may have difficulty conversing about it; the epoché of phenomenology specifically provides for this situation. Merleau-Ponty considered that “the body is expressive of meaning in many ways more fundamental than speaking” (Edie 1973, xiii), which Edie demonstrates by the example of a mother’s smile or the way the expression of anger does not of itself convey a pure thought (Edie 1973, xiv). Thus the criticisms of Bakhtin, Flood and Gadamer in relation to language are as applicable to spiritual experience, where the possibility of perception of an object is capable of extending beyond the physical senses and dialogue with a transcendent Other may not occur exclusively in the use of language. Whilst language is central to describing and sharing spiritual experiences, our epistemology must also accept its limitation of not being able to completely describe such experience. Within this limitation there remains an opportunity to share and resonate in meaning, but this does not *de facto* limit the extent of the individual’s understanding.

### **The Phenomenology of Perception**

Maurice Merleau-Ponty considered phenomenology to be a descriptive rather than a natural science which, through reduction,

becomes fully aware of both the individual's relation with world and relations to other subjects within that reality, which "slackens the intentional threads which attach us to the world and thus brings them to our notice" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, xiii). Merleau-Ponty proposed a further reduction, or separation, whereby the conceptual essences were resituated in the experience from which they arose, providing an important tool for understanding and knowledge by facilitating a deeper drawing out of the meaning of an essence within its own context, yielding a specific rather than abstract meaning. Whilst we have noted a difficulty in seeking essences the application of themes and threads to their own context may be helpful.

Macann distinguishes between *Act Intentionality* and *Operative Intentionality*, where Act Intentionality is involved in judgement and analysis within an already existing reality and Operative Intentionality is intentionality through which reality is brought into being in the first instance (Macann 1993, 163), suggesting that the life-world becomes the origin of knowledge and thought (Macann 1993, 163), that is one's life-world has a function in structuring perceptions and thus one's perceptions need to be interpreted in the context of the individual's life-world. This agrees with our earlier position of acts of consciousness being contextualised by memory. As we have observed in the case study,

this is an important issue in the way an individual understands and draws meaning from experience, locating it within an interpretative process.

The conception of a transcendental object as something detectable by one of the five senses arises, because scientifically the senses are the only means by which perception can occur, extended by phenomenology to include imagination as an abstractive ideation (Macann 1993, 15). However we are considering ideographic knowledge in the form of spiritual experience, which offers the possibility of experiences beyond these senses. Perception of “internal senses”, such as pain and emotion, are discounted by Banerjee who suggests that, whilst internal, they “cannot really be spoken of as mine” (Banerjee 1963, 19). This we may dispute and claim that pain and emotion are very much our own, where perception is the mental ability to refer sensory information to sensory objects (Pearsall 2000, 1078). Banerjee and Leibniz both claim that perceptual knowledge cannot be due to any creative activity by the mind (Banerjee 1963, 13-15), which requires perception to be reliant upon both sensory faculties and interpretative capacity. This draws us to Merleau-Ponty’s conception of sensory perception as laden with meaning, an exception to this being imagination and other representations or phantasies (Macann 1993, 15 & 21). We must also consider other

sources of spiritual experience, such as an internal *coming-to-an awareness*, in which without deductive reasoning, emotional fervour or external stimulus one becomes conscious of an object. Such an event is in many ways similar to imagination and phantasies, except that imagination is wholly the workings of the mind, whereas this phenomenon may be associated with a transcendental entity. Hermeneutic phenomenology's approach, incorporating an interpretative basis, places aside the need to determine the ontological status of such an object enabling the study of spiritual experiences, for example Imaginative Contemplation in the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises<sup>66</sup>. The pathway from perception to consciousness remains the same, but the nature of the object of perception is different. The passage across the transcendental boundary, within the specific context of spiritual experience of such objects can be accepted because it is accepted that this passage is equivalent to 'sensory' experiences, the object and this passage being bracketed by the phenomenological approach. A hermeneutic phenomenological study of spiritual experience can explore the interface between a *transcendent* and an individual but such a study could only be conducted from the human perspective. Merleau-Ponty provides helpful guidance in considering a number

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<sup>66</sup> <http://ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-spiritual-exercises/pray-with-your-imagination/>. on 19<sup>th</sup> September 2013.

of issues arising from this consideration and it is thus important to acknowledge key issues arising from Merleau-Ponty's idea of interpretation within the context of the individual: (i) a transcendent, whether theistic, self or other conception, cannot be assumed to relate to each person in the same way, nor that each individual would have the same experience, respond or describe it identically; (ii) an individual's understanding of a transcendent's revelation can only be understood by that individual within the context of their own life-world, raising issues of temporality, and (iii) the need for at least two phases to a study of spiritual experience, firstly to describe the individual's understanding of the phenomenon and secondly to analyse the phenomenon within the individual's context, which requires contextualisation of the phenomenon. A construct of understanding can rest on both hermeneutical and phenomenological approaches.

This chapter has brought us to a greater awareness of the construction of knowledge, the function of memory, the conscious interpretation of perception, the process by which meaning is ascribed to an experience, and has identified the benefits of an interpretative process in the study of spiritual experience. This type of interpretation cannot be a systematic evaluation of an experience, but rather an endeavour to gain insight into how an individual interprets phenomena constituting spiritual experience.



To do so a combined hermeneutic–phenomenological approach seems appropriate. This leads us to hermeneutic phenomenology.

### **Hermeneutic Phenomenology**

Kogler suggests that the phenomenological approach to understanding has given way to a hermeneutic approach to language and culture (Kogler 1996, 37). Habermas emphasises the importance of language-based intersubjectivity over consciousness (Habermas 1987, 15-16) and Derrida suggests that intention does not determine meaning, but rather that the meaning of a sign is determined by the recipient rather than the emitter (Derrida 1978, 177). The recipient is the person having the experience and the emitter the transcendental other, so we are able to explore an experience from the position of the participant as valid, rather than the intended message or the emitter. The theory of signs and signifiers developed by Saussure endeavours to correlate sign and meaning, deducing that the meaning of a sign is determined by the recipient, rather than the emitter (Holdcroft 1998, 481). Utilising this notion Flood relocates the focus of study to privilege sign over consciousness and experience over inner states by placing the study of religion within narrative (Flood 1999, 118). A significance of narrative for us is its capacity to communicate time. Lessing suggests paintings cannot be narrative as all parts are perceived

simultaneously, whereas narrative exists in time, unfolding sequentially to form the story (Lessing 1984, 72) and Ihde states:

For Ricoeur it is impossible that a man may know himself directly or introspectively. It is only by a series of detours that he learns about the fullness and complexity of his own being and of his relationship to Being. (Ihde 1971, 7)

This suggests an understanding of the individual may only be achieved through an analysis of his history (Ihde 1971, 8).

Gadamer notes, "The task of hermeneutics is to clarify this miracle of understanding, which is not a mysterious communion of souls, but sharing in a common meaning" (Gadamer 1975, 292). Flood extends this to a methodological inquiry based on intersubjectivity of the social world, mediated through language and culture (Flood 1999, 124), allowing different narratives for the same event, each having its own validity. Flood's assessment does not negate the value of the individual's experience, even if the meaning ascribed to it is, in part, understood by reference to others, because for that person it is their experience. However hermeneutic phenomenology is helpful because it enables the creation of a narrative, offering access to another's experiences as well as

affording an opportunity to enquire more deeply of those experiences, thereby offering access to both the richness of individual narratives and communal understanding. What Flood highlights is the significance attached to the context of the individual and their narrative.

Fitzgerald has suggested there is no such thing as religion, rather that it is a study of cultures and societies (Fitzgerald 2000, xi) with Religious Studies being contaminated by an inherent element of transcendental (Fitzgerald 2000, 47). Whilst acknowledging Fitzgerald's concerns in relation to spirituality, his overemphasis on the denial of the transcendental is as problematic as the inherent submission to it. Wiebe has suggested that Van der Leeuwby, insisting that the investigator needs to approach from a cultural position (such as a personal faith), has the effect of theologizing the scientific study of religion (Wiebe 1999, 186-187) and likewise criticizes Eliade's hermeneutical approach by denying it is an attempt at interpretation leading to increased understanding of religion (Wiebe 1999, 60). More specifically, Segal has expressed concern over an imbalance of power placed on the perspective of the "believer," (Segal 1983, 108) though McCutcheon has considered at length the problem of balancing between "believer" and "non-believer" (McCutcheon 1999, 1-14), particularly the juxtaposing of the self and the Other especially in relation to the use of meaning-laden language such as metaphor and

the investigator's ability to correctly interpret a participant's understanding about a phenomenon through the language by which that experience is subsequently communicated. Most usefully however, Cox considers that academic neutrality is impossible due to the inherent assumptions of the scholar and so it is better to make these assumptions transparent to the individuals and communities being studied, recommending scholars be conscious of their own assumptions rather than claim or assume their elimination (Cox 2006, 235) which idea underpins the approach undertaken in this work.

Having considered at length the epistemology of a phenomenological approach we also need a means of accessing and understanding the context of an experience, which we have observed is influential in the meaning-deriving process. Reflexivity assists in relation to the researcher but we also need to take into account the participant's context, for which contextualisation and complexification is helpful.

### **Contextualisation and Complexification**

An individual's description of an experience needs to be placed in context which can be divided into two parts (i) contextualisation, pertaining to those influencing factors that can be readily identified from the narrative and (ii) complexification, addressing those factors not so readily identifiable. Context

requires an appreciation of the circumstances of an individual, whether described explicitly or implicitly. For example our case study considers spirituality within Roman Catholicism and so contextualisation will involve that which is described in terms of a Roman Catholic perspective.

Swinton and Mowat describe complexification as “tak[ing] that which at first glance appears normal and uncomplicated and through a process of critical reflection at various levels, reveal that it is in fact complex and polyvalent” (Swinton and Mowat 2006, 13). This requires considering all aspects of a narrative, including those that are *ex facie* ‘normal’, and to consider that which, though initially unapparent, could have much greater significance on all or part of the narrative. The indicator of something more complex may be within the narrative but it may be elsewhere, such as in opening comments and gestures, the decoration of a home, family relations and traditions and so on. Interpreting narratives by this means assists in understanding better both the narrative and the individual, offering an opportunity for deeper appreciation of the participant’s knowledge and meaning. This process interacts with the overall hermeneutic approach associated with phenomenology in the study of spiritual experience, a central element of which is the Hermeneutic Circle.

### **The Hermeneutic Circle**

The Hermeneutic Circle is a process of interpretation by which understanding is the product of knowledge, giving rise to questions including presuppositions about the question and the narrative through which understanding and interpretation can occur (Gadamer 1975, 269). Heidegger suggested using examples of *Dasein's* encounters with entities to form interpretations, which were then revised in the light of further cases, and this occurs in a circular form constituting a hermeneutic circle (Boedeker 2005, 161). This circular process of self-questioning to seek truths is complete when the parts that are determined by the whole also determine the whole (Gadamer 2004, 291). An advantage of this process is that it brings to our awareness “arbitrary fancies and the limitations imposed by imperceptible habits of thought” (Gadamer 1975, 269). Together, the Hermeneutic Circle and contextualisation/complexification make narratives more accessible, allowing us to make further enquiries into the meanings of spiritual experience.

### **Conclusions: an Epistemological Foundation for the Study of Spiritual Experience**

Having considered the epistemological aspects of phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology as may be

applied to hermeneutic phenomenology in the study of spiritual experience within the discipline of Spirituality, we are now capable of more fully appreciating the complexity of knowledge of spiritual experiences which is in accordance with our concept of truth. However we are limited to the extent that we are unable to access the whole of a spiritual experience, accessing only an insight into significant aspects to the extent they are the elements that can be disclosed or shared.

Sharing itself has difficulties both in relation to meaning ascribed by the participant and that ascribed by the researcher. A dual approach to overcome this is employing reflexivity by the researcher and placing narratives open for readers to explore, finding their own points of resonance and identification, effectively entering into dialogue with the narrative. This interpretative approach is epistemologically founded on the work of Husserl, Heidegger and Gadamer, where the source is narrative and is presented to others for their determination. Spiritual experience, as understood by the individual, is some distance from the transcendent object at the origin and we have ascertained that to become part of someone's knowledge a phenomenon must firstly be perceived, or the person becomes intentional towards it and through the process of intentionality the object is drawn to consciousness and placed within existing memory, therefore

assigning meaning based on prior experiences and anticipated further experiences, all as understood within the individual's context. This meaning ascribing process involves, but is not limited to, language and identity as mediating influences. Not all perceptions come to consciousness but may fall to memory and be part of the knowledge and understanding process. In particular spiritual experiences may include an inner awareness that may not be reliant on the physical five senses, a consideration that is accommodated in this epistemology.

When we enquire of experiences from another person the task necessarily involves recalling from memory and re-production and pre-diction of an historic event, contained within the overall meaning process of the individual, including their identity, such that when individuals interact meaning is further enhanced through intersubjectivity of others' experiences of similar situations and dialogue, as well as the practical facets of living which colour an individual's description of their experience. Unravelling this complexity is important and our approach, using hermeneutic phenomenology as an interpretative rather than explanatory approach, offers an epistemologically valid entry into spiritual experience.

Within the approach, access to processes is achieved through researcher reflexivity, contextualisation/complexification



and the hermeneutic circle by looking at what is said within the context of the individual and seeking verification within the text for such interpretations, for which the descriptive narratives become useful. The application of the epoché within phenomenology frees us from questioning abstract issues that distract us from our objective. The reductive process within a contextualised process, using the hermeneutic circle from an empathic stance, allows us to focus on the unique features of the experience which are not mystical, ethereal descriptions but practical and identifiable features that make the experience uniquely spiritual. Notwithstanding this, by drawing a number of narratives and their associated interpretations together, we can look for universal characteristics, though it is unlikely that a complete representation of spiritual manifestations could be obtained. The truth of spiritual experiences as described, likewise, is not in the form of scientific truth, because our interest is in ideographic knowledge. The epistemological basis of hermeneutic phenomenology, which could operate in the study of spiritual experience within the discipline of Spirituality requires to support an interpretative approach rather an explanatory process. It does not appear suitable to seek objective essences of such experiences because of the subjective nature of the descriptions, notwithstanding intersubjectivity, though this will enable us to identify themes and threads rather than essences. In this chapter

we have identified that such an epistemological basis can exist, supporting hermeneutic phenomenology in this particular application.

Having added an epistemological basis to the theoretical framework, we can proceed to the consideration of the methodology approach of hermeneutic phenomenology for the study of spiritual experience.



## **Chapter 9**

### **Methodology and Spiritual Experience**

#### **Introduction**

In the previous chapter we assessed the epistemological requirements for the application of hermeneutic phenomenology to the study of spiritual experience as well as the factors involved, from perception to ascribing meaning, laying down memory and drawing upon memory as part of a developing picture of understanding. Perception in spirituality occurs via a variety of sources, not only the five physical senses. Any methodological basis will need to address this issue as well as the complex factors influencing meaning-derivation from experiences. Accordingly we proceed to assess the methodological criteria necessary for a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to the study of spiritual experience from within the discipline of spirituality and as a qualitative study, as determined in the previous chapter.

Methodology is the process of collecting and analysing data (Cresswell 2003, 3), part of the research framework suggested by Crotty, comprising theoretical, epistemological, methodological and method elements (Crotty 1998, 2-4) and addresses the interplay of knowledge claims, strategy and methods necessary to answer the

research question (Cresswell 2003, 18). Methodology is important because it constitutes the means of gathering and thereafter processing data by application of the methods, such that any resultant data can be understood within epistemological and philosophical contexts resulting in new understanding, whether by describing the familiar from an unfamiliar perspective, offering a richer description of the object of study or placing elements of the study within a reconstructed life-world.

### **Methodological Approaches**

#### **Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies**

Prior to considering the methodological issues pertaining to hermeneutic phenomenology it is useful to consider briefly other social scientific approaches though, as Blum has identified in the study of experience, social scientific approaches that employ explanatory and naturalistic orientations have a place in the study of religious experience only after the experiences have been described (Proudfoot 1985, 195). This is precisely where the interpretative capacity of phenomenology becomes significant and as Blum states, “sets it apart from social scientific or naturalistic methods that seek to explain religion” (Blum 1012, 1029).

Methodological approaches can be essentially classified as either qualitative or quantitative. Though not mutually exclusive, such

as in mixed method research (Cresswell 2003, 208), they are nevertheless fundamentally different approaches and we need to consider criteria to ensure that there is not a conflict between the epistemological and methodological bases. Qualitative approaches are less widely recognised than quantitative approaches, partially because they possess qualities of 'emergent research' rather than constrained, analytical and empirical characteristics associated with quantitative research and the scientific method which is conducted in relation to 'tangible entities'. Accordingly qualitative approaches require a more flexible use of theory (Cresswell 2003, 119), ranging from the extensive rationalisation of a theory which is to be tested prior to commencement of fieldwork (such as in experiments) to much less rationalised processes, such as the formation of a theory during data analysis (such as in grounded theory).

This is in contrast to a quantitative approach, which would firstly establish a hypothesis and theory (Cresswell 2003, 119) prior to proceeding with experimentation to establish the validity or otherwise of the hypothesis, which is the "scientific method" (Cresswell 2003, 6). Our objective is a deeper understanding of individuals' spiritual experiences for which no initial hypothesis is possible and which requires a flexible approach capable of dealing with idiosyncrasies, so this knowledge will be ideographic. Accordingly a qualitative approach is appropriate and collaborates with the epistemological basis.

## **Qualitative Approaches**

Qualitative research offers a number of approaches, though each explores the phenomenon from a different perspective. Denscombe importantly differentiates between strategy and methods, categorising strategy into the established approaches such as case studies (Denscombe 2007, 35), ethnography (Denscombe 2007, 61), grounded theory (Denscombe 2007, 88), phenomenology (Denscombe 2007, 75), mixed methods (which involves at a basic level combined qualitative and quantitative approaches) (Denscombe 2007, 107), and surveys (Denscombe 2007, 7-8). In making this distinction, Denscombe defines strategy as “general procedures of research” whilst defining method as “detailed procedure of data collection, analysis and writing” (Denscombe 2007, 3). This correlates with Crotty’s idea of methodology (Crotty 1998, 4). Cresswell cites as examples of qualitative strategies: case studies, ethnography, grounded theory, phenomenology and narrative research (Cresswell 2003, 14-15), implying these are of primary significance in qualitative research and that strategy is an important influence on the method (Cresswell 2003, 179). It is important to consider these principle methodological approaches to ascertain how and why hermeneutic phenomenology may be a suitable approach, having regard also to methodology as the link between epistemology and method, translating the epistemological

means of 'knowing' into a theory of its practical application for understanding.

### **Case Study**

Gillham identifies the key features of case study research as the investigation of a “unit of human activity embedded in the real world” (Gillham 2000, 1), which is capable of being studied within its own context even although it may be difficult to isolate the unit from its context (Gillham 2000, 1). This approach is chosen deliberately on the basis of the specific attributes of the case, whether practical problem or theoretical issue (Descombe 2007, 39), relying on a variety of evidential sources and the weight to be attached to each. This leads to a strategy in which theoretical models can only be produced after the data has been analysed, rather than theoretical hypotheses being tested (Gillham 2000, 2). Furthermore the results of such an enquiry are not capable of being generalised because many elements are unique to the specific group under study (Gillham 2000, 6) and often what is sought is the phenomenon behind the activity (Gillham 2000, 7). Gillham suggests that the researcher is not detached but influences the dynamics of the situation by their presence and activities and such interaction needs to be recognised (Gillham 2000, 7), whilst Markham suggests that although non-verbal markers are inherent in research involving interaction directly with participants, some researchers may



unconsciously use non-verbal features, such as dress, articulation, posture etc. to categorise and thus influence analysis of data, which can be problematic (Markham 2004, 114). The voice that a case study gives to the object can be significant by changing opinions and understandings of seemingly ordinary but poorly understood situations, leading to significant changes in societies understanding of others and itself (Gillham 2000, 101-102), however an objective is to produce theories.

A case study approach does not have a mechanism to address issues such as truth and veracity, especially in relation to the established existence and interaction with God or 'Transcendent Other', which would need to be assessed or dealt with.

### **Ethnography**

Describing an insider's view of a social phenomenon provides a deep insight into the meaning and purpose behind that phenomenon from the perspective of those directly involved in it and Taylor suggests that ethnography is capable of this by seeking the insider's perspective in order to provide a basis for understanding the insider's own worldview, producing situated specific knowledge rather than universal overviews (Taylor 2002, 3). The ethnographic approach involves the researcher participating, overtly (e.g. Stefaniszyn 1964) or covertly (e.g. Luhrmann 1989), in a social context for an extensive period,

drawing data from observation, listening, questioning, working with other sources available (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995, 1) and writing often where possible at the time of observation or shortly thereafter (Clifford 1986, 1-2) in order to contemporaneously record observations made. Clifford suggests this is not sufficient and that the subject of ethnography enquiry, such as culture, is often a coalition of contesting codes, interpretations and linguistic processes (Clifford 1986, 2), thereby being “inherently partial” (Clifford 1986, 7), yet it still draws out and describes novel features of aspects of society and culture both familiar and foreign.

Notwithstanding the familiarity of the subject under study to the researcher an “anthropologically strange” approach is required to avoid the researcher’s presuppositions and biases, massaging the data and thus outcomes (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995, 9). Accordingly reflexivity is an important element.

Ethnography is a strategy in which the researcher becomes subsumed within the subject of study, attempting to record and subsequently describe the phenomenon under investigation. It also has difficulties in dealing with issues of truth, particularly in relation to spiritual matters because it is unable to set aside such issues and often desires to provide an explanation for the subject under enquiry.

## **Grounded Theory**

Glaser and Strauss's "The Discovery of Grounded Theory" (1967) was a response to research involving the testing of theory through giving priority to the data and subsequently deducing theory (Denscombe 2007, 89), the converse of the scientific approach. This strategy requires data to be collected and then a theory to be deduced, with that theory being further tested, involving a constant process of comparing data with theory (Denscombe 2007, 90). The overriding criterion is that the theory ultimately deduced is practically useful and thus this methodology is grounded within pragmatism (Denscombe 2007, 91).

Approaching the subject with an open mind, though not a blank mind, was recognised by Glaser and Strauss as a necessary starting point, acknowledging that the researcher would have a perspective and question, but without preconceived theories that would determine the course of the project (Glaser and Strauss 1967, 33). The gathering of empirical data is prioritised without initial determination of what should be included or excluded from the sample, the data thereafter leading in the form of a discovery (Glaser and Strauss 1967, 45), the final outcomes being meaningful and useful on a daily basis for both researchers and laymen: "a test of a good theory is whether or not it works 'on the ground'" (Locke 2001, 59).

Denscombe suggests that this strategy is useful in qualitative research investigating practical situations, routine activities or seeking participants' perspectives and is often utilised in small scale research (Denscombe 2007, 92), where the subject is novel or has received little attention (Goulding 2002, 55). Data collection can be from a wide variety of sources (Strauss 1987, 1) but the particularly novel feature of this approach is the mode of data analysis (Turner 1983, 335), the manner in which the researcher "collects, codes and analyses... decides what data to collect next and where to find them in order to develop his theory as it emerges" (Glaser and Strauss 1967, 45). This demands flexibility to respond to the data as it surfaces, leading the research in ways not initially anticipated (Strauss and Corbin 1990, 78). When further analysis yields no further discovery then theoretical saturation has occurred and the analysis is complete (Strauss 1987, 21). This approach is focussed on theory deduction and so sits less comfortably with our theoretical and epistemological foundations previously discussed.

### **Narrative Research**

Narrative Theory is described by Cresswell as a process whereby a researcher obtains an account of individual lives, retelling the story in a form that combines views of the participant(s) and the researcher in a narrative chronology, which becomes collaborative

(Cresswell 2003, 15). Whilst not providing a specific framework from which to work it may provide a means of identifying and studying conflicting layers of meaning (Squire 2008, 1), offering the possibility of examining not only the narrative but the method of composition, authors, recipients, lifespan, transmission and death (Squire 2008, 2), opening a novel window into the world as experienced and understood. The material under examination, though often largely narrative in nature, can include “scraps of letters, laundry lists, extensive multi-volume diaries, visual materials, photo albums, video diaries...,” (Squires 2008, 5) with the focus being the narrative giving expression to the “individual internal representations of phenomena” (Squire 2008, 5). An alternative form of narrative is that constructed by dialogue such that narratives attend less to expressions of internal representations and more to forms of social code (Squire 2008, 5). As a result of the nature of this strategy it usually deals with individuals or small groups (Cresswell 2003, 183).

The use of ‘small’ narratives appears to provide an emphasis on events with social orientation, whereas ‘big’ narratives appear to provide the converse (Squire 2008, 7). Whilst this method may provide a rich and complex narrative its function thereafter is to analyse same in its context, to provide an understanding of the participant’s view of the world in relation to a specific time or event, but does not

seek to explore a specific phenomenon, such as spiritual experience in terms of the phenomenon.

### **Phenomenology**

Denscombe summarizes the phenomenological approach as embracing subjectivity over objectivity, description over analysis, interpretation over measurement and agency over structure, being utilised in research investigating people's perceptions, beliefs and emotions (Denscombe 2007, 75) and locating the ideology of participants at the centre of the research, by acknowledging that it is through their actions and interpretations that they make sense of and understand their life-world, which thereby attributes credibility, respect and validity to participants' understanding of daily life (Denscombe 2007, 78). Crotty describes phenomenology as seeking to "...render lived experience intelligible" (Crotty 1996, 13) and is firstly concerned about human experience providing a rich narrative, describing phenomena as directly experienced, especially the basics of social existence rather than the causation of such experience (Denscombe 2007, 76-77).

The objective of the phenomenological approach initially is to present the experiences gathered in a way that is as faithful as possible to the original understanding and description of each individual (Denscombe 2007, 78), which is achieved by addressing authentic

experiences describing adequately the complexity of the situation. This strategy may also ascertain how individuals “come to see things as they are” (Denscombe 2007, 81).

The researcher’s beliefs and value structure will be influential and thus it is necessary to place as little reliance as possible on these predispositions (Denscombe 2007, 81), particularly where common-sense assumptions are made which may obscure or mislead, and is achieved by temporarily suspending common-sense beliefs, which is the ‘bracketing-off’ process of phenomenology (Denscombe 2007, 81). Schutz has suggested an approach in this regard as being one of a stranger (Denscombe 2007, 81), allowing the researcher to see things which would otherwise be hidden because they are so normal, illustrating this as the stranger’s need to “figure out” how things work from first principles (Denscombe 2007, 81).

Phenomenology thus places the individual at the centre of the research, accepting as credible their narrative in order to explore meaning within their life-world and is capable of being interpretative rather than explanatory.

### **The Requirements of this Study**

The objective of this study is to assess the capacity and efficacy of hermeneutic phenomenology as a means to study spiritual experiences within the context of the discipline of

Spirituality. All of the foregoing approaches with the exception of phenomenology are explanatory, focussed as they are on social scientific approaches whose purpose is to explain phenomena, whereas the phenomenological approach offers a means of describing rather than explaining spiritual experiences, though to be compatible with the theoretical and epistemological foundations this methodology would need to adopt an interpretative approach. Thus Blum rightly suggests that phenomenology, including hermeneutic phenomenology, offers an alternative approach to the study of spiritual experience which social scientific methods are principally concerned with, where the term explanation means providing observable, natural factors as reasons supporting a proposition regarding casual relationships.

The purpose in this brief review of qualitative approaches is not to discount them from the study of spiritual experience, as that is not the objective of this work, which is the assessment only of hermeneutic phenomenology. However it is useful to observe the different approaches of these methodologies. Phenomenology provides a useful strategy because it does not insist on the reduction of data to theories, allowing the subject matter to remain within its context and providing for the 'bracketing-out' of issues that other strategies may find difficult. In particular the acceptance/denial of a Transcendent Other, or of a distinct transcendent dimension, are difficult facets of this study for the other



strategies and phenomenology permits this by its epoché. Furthermore phenomenology has been noted as being well suited to the study of individuals' experience, which is a core element in this project. It is interesting to note that Cox highlights the significance of phenomenology in religious studies because it studies religion rather than religion from the perspective of another discipline such as Cultural Studies, Philosophy, Psychology, Sociology, Theology etc. (Cox 2006, 3). Blum, in referring to Heidegger, highlights the limitation of theology in that it discloses only from within the perspective of faith (Blum 2012, 1033). This project lies within the emerging discipline of spirituality and, although the case study looked at an aspect of contemporary Roman Catholic spirituality, its purpose was to find a practical example within which to consider the methodology, which cannot presume a theological basis because that would be founding the methodology on the dogma of a particular expression of spirituality, thereby excluding all other expressions of spiritual experience, which is not the object of this project. Accordingly a methodology not founded on theological or equivalent terms becomes essential, permitting the exploration of spirituality as a phenomenon rather than through the lens of another discipline, which would distort the work by the implications or priorities carried or embedded therein. Necessary elements required of a methodology for this project are (1) placing the participants at the centre of the research, (2) giving validity to their lived experience and

(3) placing aside questions about truth and being faithful to the narratives of the participants, whilst placing same in such a manner as to reveal new meanings and richer descriptions of those lived experiences.

### **Phenomenological Methodologies**

The methodological approach of hermeneutic phenomenology needs to be compatible with the theoretical and epistemological. Phenomenology is unusual in that it describes both an epistemological-philosophical system and a methodological approach, so using a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology suggests the opportunity for complementarity amongst the elements of the framework, however it is important to consider various aspects of phenomenological methodologies. A distinction has been noted between traditional European phenomenology and North American phenomenology, the latter becoming more prominent in the last four decades (Crotty 1996, 1). European phenomenology is viewed as attempting to discern the object of the phenomenon: “It elucidates what people experience” (Crotty 1996, 3). It is associated with the Utrecht School, also known as Dutch phenomenology, with key proponents including Van Manen and Bleeker labelling this methodology “hermeneutic phenomenology” (Cohen 2000, 9). The North American approach is to “... have meticulously developed step-by-step methods of enquiry and analysis

whose paramount purpose is precisely to preserve the subjective character of their data” (Crotty 1996, 3) and is connected with the Duquesne School, having key proponents in Van Kaam and Giorgi (Cohen 2000, 5). The distinctions between phenomenological schools may be reduced to the objective pursuit of the phenomenon or the exhaustive description of the subjective experience of the phenomenon. Within the Utrecht School there is an emphasis on Gadamer’s exposition which, in relation to Heidegger’s rationale, proposes that within Human Sciences the function of hermeneutic phenomenology is the means by which persons understand and give meaning to their life-world, though ultimately these are always indeterminate (Gadamer 1989, 367-368), with Heidegger’s position placing more emphasis on interpretation (Gadamer 1989, 269).

A further issue identified by Crotty is the reductive process across a series of participants’ interviews, culminating in identifying that which is common to all (Crotty 1996, 13), sometimes used as a means of determining the exhaustion of the analytical phase (Smucker 1996, 83). Whilst the interplay of different participants is important and needs to be incorporated within a methodology, there must be a balance between attaching value according to commonality and minimising the risk of devaluing the individual experience, which is a core value of the phenomenological approach. The methodology employed needs to be capable of holding in tension the experiences of each individual whilst

locating same in a context formed by other participants whose narratives have been subjected to the same phenomenological analysis. But there is an important distinction between reduction to commonalities and a search for universal themes amongst narratives by identifying multi-present items within their context across narratives without further reduction, rather than “a process of integration leading to understanding” (Allen 1978, 163-164). Such integration does not require commonality on all issues but a sense of universality in terms of the experiences.

Whilst the creation of rich narratives to describe the subjective experiences of individuals is an essential element, it is also important to move towards an understanding of the lived experience of participants and to seek universalities, such as the themes and threads in the case study which offer an interpretative rather than explanatory passage to greater meaning, because by interpretation an attempt is made to draw out significant features rather than explain them in terms of theoretical models. Van Manen has defined a theme as that which may be viewed as the focus of the point of meaning (Van Manen 1997, 87) or as the “...knots in the web of our experiences...” (Van Manen 1997, 90) and threads as elements associated with a theme or connecting themes. Hermeneutic phenomenology is founded on a principle of giving respect, credibility and validity to participants’ voices rather than the forces driving the participant to such experiences, the language used to

describe experiences or an explanatory mode, but rather a sympathetic interpretation, accepting that within this interpretation is the researcher's work in drawing new understanding. A hermeneutic rather than interpretative approach is preferred because the interpretative carries objectification whereas hermeneutics brings sensitivity to the acceptance that interpretation is a function of human-ness and subjectivity. Critically, care needs to be taken in order to fulfil both the essential primary stage of rich, descriptive narrative and the secondary stage of seeking meaning from the experiences, whilst acknowledging the complexity of the involvement of interpretation.

There is also the distinction between philosophical phenomenology and practical phenomenology, where the former represents the principal types of philosophical phenomenology such as ideals about philosophical systems whilst practical phenomenology applies phenomenological approaches and philosophical principles to real situations. In seeking to better understand spiritual experiences a practical phenomenological approach is appropriate, so whilst narratives are formed by language the lived experience remains in the narrative, not exclusively in the language used to describe it. An approach in accordance with Gadamer may then be usefully adopted because of the appeal of a subjective/interpretative methodology to gain understanding, rather than a linguistic analysis, because although the etymological origins of words used are helpful and the choice or

words and expressions useful (Van Manen 1997, 58) the object of study remains 'spiritual experience'. "Ordinary language is in some sense a huge reservoir in which the incredible variety of richness of human experience is deposited". (Van Manen 1997, 61). The interpretation is of narratives as given rather than their construction, though that construction may tell us about how the experience is understood and meaning is attached thereto, but not in priority to the actual description or bringing into focus the meaning for the participant(s).

Methodological approaches described by Cohen, Crotty, Moustakas and Van Manen are useful and, though not directed necessarily at spiritual phenomenological enquiry, utilise a phenomenological approach in nursing and education areas which are also deeply rooted in lived experience. Implicit within these methodologies is the notion that "truth" is relative and subjective and dependent upon a number of factors such as past experiences, knowledge base, social and cultural settings, ethical and religious backgrounds etc. The framework developed in the previous chapters noted the process of perception, intentionality leading to consciousness, and this methodological approach follows a pathway from consciousness to meaning in order to ascertain how the participant understood the phenomenon that was the origin of the experience and accords with the theoretical and epistemological

framework. The methodology needs to address both the interpretative dimension of the narrative and the researcher's interpretation thereof; for the latter we will require the assistance of reflexivity and for the former we may turn to Hermeneutics, the 'Science of Interpretation'. After this we will consider the application of an explanatory model within the application of hermeneutic phenomenology, using the example in the case study of the "Gift motif".

### **Hermeneutics**

A key function of Hermeneutics is to "...make explicit and formal the ontological propensity of human beings to interpret the world" (Swinton and Mowat 2006, 108), which is based on Gadamer's proposition that humans not merely interpret but live and understand by means of interpretation (Gadamer 1989, xx). Heidegger's definition of Hermeneutics suggests that the approach entails three aspects: (a) an attempt to understand the world as presented to us, (b) how we understand the world as presented to us and (c) an attempt to understand being, as opposed to nothing, proposing that Hermeneutics is about how people make meaning from what they experience (Cohen 2000, 5). Hermeneutics offers a means by which a researcher can present participants' descriptions in a language accessible to others who may not have a background from which to contextualise the participant's narrative (McCutcheon 1999, 3). Whereas phenomenology

seeks to re-trace from the narrative to the phenomena as a desire to “...explain the world in an objective, unbiased way”, hermeneutics seeks to give voice and validity to the meaning that participants place on their recounting of the experience by placing interpretation at the core of its approach: “...interpretation, bias and prejudice are crucial to the ways in which human beings encounter the world” (Swinton and Mowat 2006, 108).

A combination of these two methodological approaches working together in a “pincer” style action between a subjectively based interpretative paradigm and an objective phenomenological pursuit of phenomena can be reconciled through an acknowledgement of commonalities: (1) both contain an active construction of the social world in which meaning can be ascertained, (2) both deal primarily with linguistic or narrative material, (3) both are concerned with understanding (Swinton and Mowat 2006, 108-109) and (4) both are philosophically rooted in reflexivity (Van Manen 1990, 7-8).

Gadamer states “...the process of construal is already governed by an expectation of meaning that follows from the context of what has gone before” (Gadamer 2004, 291), from which we can draw a circular process of ‘meaning-giving’ and understanding that it works within a phenomenal encounter. Heidegger and Gadamer, following on from Schleiermacher, advanced the notion of the ‘Hermeneutic Circle’ whereby understanding is both based on some knowledge and raises



further questions, that something needs to be known and understood about the topic under enquiry in order to raise a pertinent question but in answering the question, further questions arise as to the presuppositions under which the question was first asked and so a further dialogue continues completing this circle (Heidegger 1962, 153; 194-195). For Gadamer the Hermeneutic Circle is a positive advance by assisting the interpreter in being aware of self-indulgences, “arbitrary fancies and the limitations imposed by imperceptible habits of thought” (Gadamer 1975, 269), so that the researcher can be more alert to his own meaning being projected onto the text which ‘fore-projections’ contain meaning and sit in parallel with one another until clearer meanings emerge as a more unified meaning develops, with more relevant fore-projections taking precedence and greater understanding developing (Gadamer 1975, 269). This highlights the importance of the researcher in the hermeneutic phenomenological process, so consideration ought to be given to the researcher’s situation in relation to the narratives.

An important part of the hermeneutic approach is contextualisation and complexification.

### **Contextualisation and Complexification**

The processes of complexification and contextualisation are considered very important in the methodology, the difference being that contextualisation seeks to place an element of narrative within the circumstances in which it was located, whilst complexification seeks to clarify the underlying factors not otherwise apparent, which are nevertheless significant in creating the experience of which the narrative speaks. Mehan has noted the importance of understanding both the context and the individual's understandings of both the phenomenon and their conception of reality, providing an example of a study in which children were asked which of three animals could fly – bird, elephant or dog. Most replied both bird and elephant because they knew of Dumbo the Disney character, an elephant who can fly. Thus within their concept of reality both elephant and bird could fly (Mehan 1974, 249). Van Manen suggests that “hermeneutic significance” is given by the assignation of meaning to lived experience which is an interpretive process (Van Manen 1997, 37). In the case study we observed how a participant held deep associations with her Irish heritage. Through complexification it could be seen here how a period of suffrage and persecution a number of centuries previously was of influence, though not apparent from the narrative.

Complexification is a process of contextualisation in which the object of study at first appears straightforward, but on reflection and

consideration of the object and its place in surrounding circumstances is found to be much more complex (Swinton and Mowat 2006, 13). The descriptive aspects of spirituality provided in the transcripts can therefore be considered in terms of the narrative of the participant as revealed in the whole transcript and the researcher's field notes associated therewith. By reflecting on what that means for the participant it is possible to gain a much richer description of phenomena. The practical approach to this would be by considering the various elements comprising a situation.

Phenomenology and hermeneutics have theoretical elements that complement one another, however the means of recognising, reducing and taking account of the researcher's bias, understandings and means of interpretation needs to be assessed.

### **Reflexivity and Insider / Outsider Perspectives**

McCutcheon lays the challenge to develop a tool that facilitates a researcher's entry to the religious experiences and meanings of another, bridging the gap of subject and object, of insider and outsider, and claims that the tool is phenomenology whose characteristics include non-critical, empathic descriptions of human behaviour (McCutcheon 1999, 3). Bridging the gap between subject and object in the context of the researcher's participation is known as reflexivity and is an essential part of a qualitative project such as this.

Hufford has noted that "...all-knowing is subjective" and that the "...'objective world' is what knowers claim to know about it" (Hufford 1999, 294-295). Reflexivity is the process whereby the researcher acknowledges his own processes of meaning-making and seeks to minimise their influence in the attempt to understand the experience of the participant (McCutcheon 1999, 9). This means it is essential to acknowledge and account for such subjectivity and any underpinning assumptions the researcher brings in the interpretation of narratives, it being insufficient for a researcher merely to describe and analyse. He must also explain both the position from which he observes and why he has chosen that position (O'Connor 1995, 48). We must balance on the one hand the impossibility of being disinterested or objective in spiritual matters against excessive reflexivity, which leads to nihilism, whereby nothing can be said of anything (Hufford 1999, 298). Flood argues that the scientific approach of objectivity and 'truth' is inapplicable because "...knowledge about religion cannot be grounded on certainty" but there remains limited options, of which the most applicable is a fallibilist approach, accepting there is always a level of indeterminacy (Flood 1999, 68). Both Hufford and Flood identify the delicacy of narratives and the inherent subjectivity of the participant on the one hand and the inevitability of some meaning ascription by the researcher, which ascription can be reduced and acknowledged, thereby lessening its impact. Thus reflexivity cannot completely

eliminate subjectivity to produce a complete and accurate narrative, but it can identify the position of the researcher which both aids in the diminution of that influence by drawing it to the researcher's and the reader's attention by locating the perspective of the researcher.

Empathy or "an indefinable sympathy" (Kristensen 1960, 10) may be a means by which a researcher could through imaginative re-experiencing based on his own religious experience re-enact, but not replicate, the participant's religious experience (Kristensen 1960, 7-10), as a means of the researcher as an 'outsider' to that practice reaching into the experience of the 'insider', though priority of interpretation must be given to the 'insider' (Cox 2006, 115).

The 'insider/outsider problem' draws attention to the problems and limitations of objectivity within the study of Human Sciences, including spirituality, but also the opportunity to access how others and ourselves derive meaning and understanding, calling for efforts to be placed towards reflexive practices of putting to one side the researcher's subjectivity whilst acknowledging that complete objectivity is not possible, nor perhaps desirable: "Humans are always already tangled up in... a second hand world of meanings and have not access to reality" (Denzin 1997, 246). This ties in with our epistemological assessment. Although individuals do carry knowledge, derive meaning, have understanding and are capable of social interaction it is not in a quantifiable or objective manner, but being capable of meaningful

interaction suggests that it is possible for us to gain deep insight into others' experiences, understanding their meaning. Reflexivity aids us in recognising bias to minimise its impact whilst acknowledging it cannot be eradicated.

### **Hermeneutic Phenomenology as Methodology**

Hermeneutic phenomenology was developed to look at phenomena with a focus on interpretation, including how persons interpret their experiences and give meaning to their lives (Cohen 2000, 5). The Hermeneutic Circle involves moving from unthematized to thematized data and explicit renderings of the phenomena (Crotty 1996, 82), the close relationship between questioning and understanding giving the hermeneutic experience its true dimension (Gadamer 2004, 367) and so a process of asking reflexively about the experience discloses something about the core of the experience, which both illuminates our understanding of the object and generates further questions about it, which circularity provides further illumination and more questions. After having described the experience of the participant, the function of the researcher is to translate and interpret the participant's experiences and claims which is hermeneutics (McCutcheon 1999, 3). Therefore the approach would be in at least two stages, firstly describing the experience and, secondly, interpreting it to identify the phenomena. Gadamer highlights that "...understanding is

always more than merely re-creating someone else's meaning", signifying that the hermeneutic process of questioning itself opens up a variety of possibilities of meanings, the resultant outcome being that which is 'meaningful' being drawn into one's own contemplation of the subject (Gadamer 2004, 368). Thus the research must be on guard against self-misdirection. McCutcheon defines the attempt to understand the meaning attributed to an experience by a participant as the nuanced, accurate description of experience, followed by an interpretation thereof, to "...find meaning in beliefs, symbols and behaviours" (McCutcheon 1999, 5), in contrast to a reduction of experiences in the whole complexity of nature which would be subject to a scientific analysis leading to explanation (McCutcheon 1999, 5), which again fits well with the other aspects of a framework for hermeneutic phenomenology. Nevertheless, the outcome of hermeneutic phenomenology is not some ethereal and incomprehensible entity (Van Manen 1997, 39) but a re-telling of the object of enquiry in such a manner as is both intelligible and compelling, with which others may resonate and identify.

The difference, in practical terms, between the phenomenological traditions is essentially on the one hand an attempt to explain a phenomenon through description and interpretation founded on a notion of causation and located within objectivity and on the other hand an attempt to understand a phenomenon through a

description and a hermeneutic interpretation of lived experience through re-telling the experience. To study spirituality we seek the latter approach, to understand and record the experience.

Hermeneutic phenomenology appears to provide a powerful and relevant methodology for the study of spiritual experience by offering an approach to understanding narratives in a manner that can both incorporate but also move beyond description, to offer an insight into the meanings attached to experiences within a co-ordinated theoretical framework.

### **Methodology in this Study**

The research question is the assessment of hermeneutic phenomenology as a methodology that enables a deeper understanding of spiritual experience. Knowledge about spiritual experience is ideographic in nature as we have observed in previous chapters and so research in this area will be from a qualitative methodology for which hermeneutic phenomenology offers a helpful approach. We need to apply this strategy to the research subject, spiritual experience, in detail and at a methodological level in order to establish its viability and in so doing a number of issues arise:

1. Truth, transcendence and the 'Other' have been satisfactorily addressed in the theoretical and epistemological foundations considered earlier. Methodologically this operates by application



of the epoché, thereby setting aside such issues without judgement

2. The elucidation of the nature of an experience, including the identification of the meaning attached to the experience and the aspect of the experience giving rise to such meaning. We are interested in exploring those aspects of contemporary practice that are engaging and relevant, from which to find the essential meaning, which Van Manen illustrates by, in seeing a teacher, not seeing a person, but the difference that sets apart that person as a 'teacher' (Van Manen 1997, 77). In attempting to ascertain how meaning is formed by a participant the aim is to describe the experience in a manner that is both capable of being understood and revealing its nature, whilst also highlighting its significance in novel and compelling ways rather than as some mysterious conception that eludes description or comprehension (Van Manen 1997, 39). The acknowledgement of ideographic knowledge demonstrates the acceptance of unique experience whilst the hermeneutic circle with contextualisation/complexification offers an approach to understanding the rationale for the meaning of the experience as described, whilst facilitating the identification of themes and threads through a co-ordinated and compatible theoretical/epistemological/methodological framework. Again the

theoretical and epistemological bases for our approach underpin this approach.

3. Prejudice, interpretation and meaning-attachment. A purely phenomenological approach may have difficulty with this element because of its focus on objectivity, however the application of hermeneutics as a means of interpretation addresses issues of prejudice and bias. The process of questioning and answering operates in two distinct and useful dimensions. By questioning it enquires further into the narratives, probing to the essential meaning of phenomena, and by questioning it also provides an opportunity for identifying bias, prejudice and other effects which may draw the analysis away from the spiritual experience.
4. Can hermeneutic phenomenology be employed to take account of matters beyond the strict content of the narrative, because we are endeavouring to provide a rich description and to draw out themes and threads? Whilst not attempting to reduce experience to commonalities, it is helpful to locate individual experiences within a wider setting and the theoretical sensitivity provides an opening to draw out otherwise hidden meanings in narrative (Strauss & Corbin 1990, 42). We can differentiate between commonality and universality, whereby the former is a reductive process identifying only those characteristics shared by all,

whilst the latter is not reductive but views the whole entity and seeks traits which resonate or are sympathetic or equivalent with one another without necessarily being the same. Complexification is useful in identifying universality because it is capable of illuminating such universal elements whilst maintaining the lived experience of each individual as the focal point of study (Swinton and Mowat 2006, 13-14). Gadamer highlighted the importance of complexification from the perspective of the researcher's involvement stating, "We cannot avoid thinking about what the author accepted unquestioningly and hence did not consider, and bringing it into the openness of the question" (Gadamer 2004, 367), thus implicitly suggesting there must be aspects left uncovered and implied within the narrative of the participant.

5. How can a narrative be obtained that can subsequently be subjected to hermeneutic phenomenological enquiry? It is preferable to engage with participants in such a manner as will be most conducive to producing a narrative that is free and open, possibly even unreflective. To do so speech is preferable over writing, as people will generally speak with less reserve (Van Manen 1997, 64). This frees a participant from the restrictions of written language and allows the use of everyday speech which may not comply with rules of grammar, syntax or

proper sentence construction. Adherence to such regulation is likely to stilt a narrative and detract from spontaneity, whereas verbal narrative is often interspaced with language fillers such as “you know” and “ehh”. Such spontaneity of the verbal narrative provides less opportunity for reflection and interpretation by the participant, at least less than that in a written narrative. The less the experience is analysed by the participant the more it is likely to remain closer to the experience, that is what the experience was rather than that which the participant thought it ought to have been. A written narrative also has value, but a verbal narrative is preferable. The methodology supports the use of recorded interviews to create transcripts as the basis for the narratives.

6. Language is significant in our methodology because it is primarily through language that the core material to be analysed is composed within language, often non-written language, and it is only through language that experience is capable of taking on a symbolic form (Van Manen 1990, 111). Therefore the limit of a person’s language may restrict access to some of the most profound elements of ‘truth’ (Van Manen 1990, 112). Cohen supports this view, claiming “...language is the primary way we express our meanings” (Cohen 2000, 10). Gadamer goes further, proposing that one’s experience of meaning takes place

within language and that "...language is the medium in which substantive understanding and agreement takes place between two people" (Gadamer 1975(b), 386). Van Manen reminds us that meaning is "multi-dimension and multi-layered" (Van Manen 1997, 78), so the application of reflexivity by the researcher together with the process of contextualisation/ complexification is crucial.

On this basis the meaning that is identified in the study comes from the interaction of researcher and participants and for Van Manen, like Kirstensen, the researcher's function is to seek the participants' reflections of their lived experiences, offering narrative description as means of deeper understanding (Van Manen 1997, 62). One issue that arises is the verification, validity, trustworthiness and generalisability of the description, essences and narratives.

In many methodologies verification is achieved by participant accreditation and, although verification by participants is viewed favourably, a difficulty lies in the possible distortion of the original data. Gadamer has highlighted an example of where this could occur where, for a participant not having previously considered an issue, reading the narrative brings the issue into the open (Gadamer 2004, 367), but in drawing the participant's attention to it post-reflexive editing by the participant may ensue. The narrative is preferably a verbal discourse

subsequently reduced to writing via transcription rather than a written narrative by the participant, thus the risk that subsequent editing by participants reduces or removes the authenticity by changing what 'was' said to what 'ought' to have been said, especially if time is available for subsequent reflection.

### **Validity, Trustworthiness and Generalisability**

Lincoln and Guba characterise trustworthiness in relation to the question, "How can an inquirer persuade his or her audience...that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to?" (Lincoln and Guba 1985, 290). This is done by reference to credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln and Guba 1985, 289-331), however these criteria are not compatible with a phenomenological understanding as they fail to account properly for the uniqueness of the individual's experience in their unique temporal context. Whitehead's view on trustworthiness in relation to hermeneutic phenomenology from a nursing perspective was dependent on the application of the Hermeneutic Circle and reflexivity, suggesting that the researcher describing and interpreting their experience gives credibility, that the outcomes being capable of being transferred to another context gave dependability and that the researcher showing how interpretations have been reached gave confirmability. (Whitehead 2004, 513-515). The capacity of relocating findings to another context appears more in

accord with transferability rather than dependability, however for all of these categories, whilst they may be applicable in nursing where procedural patterns are more normal, within spirituality this would accord more with generalisability. Many, such as Koch, Padgett, Barbour, Leitz, Langer as well as Furman and Standing discuss protocols for demonstrating trustworthiness and validity, including the use of triangulation, checklists, peer debriefing and participant validation. However, as Sandelowski notes, these are not necessarily helpful due to drawing in further variables (Sandelowski 1993, 2-8) and Horsburgh notes for participant validation that participants may have different agendas and perspectives and it is inappropriate to expect them to validate research (Horsburgh 2003, 310). Popay suggests that good qualitative research is marked by variability rather than standardisation, illuminating the meanings, actions and contexts of the participants (Popay, Rogers and Williams 1998, 345-346). Trustworthiness and validity in hermeneutic phenomenology as applied to spiritual experience within our methodology is achieved through reflexivity, always acknowledging that bias will remain. But by opening the narratives, enquiry and reflexivity to the reader there is opportunity for the reader to take this into account. Horsburgh describes generalisability within qualitative research as “the extent to which a theory developed in one study may be exported to provide explanatory theory for the experiences of other individuals who are in comparable

situations” (Horsburgh 2003, 311), which as applied to our methodology refers to the extent to which others may resonate and identify with the research outcomes but not explain it.

Central to this project is the quest for understanding. Gadamer notes both that it is the closeness of the relationship between questioning and understanding that gives the hermeneutic experience its true dimension and that:

“understanding is always more than merely recreating someone else’s meaning. Questioning opens up the possibilities of meanings and thus what is meaningful passes into one’s own thinking on the subject”. (Gadamer 2004, 367-368).

In this chapter we have considered hermeneutic phenomenological as a methodological approach, using verbal narratives transcribed to writing for interpretative purposes, but with those narratives being subject to placement within context by means of contextualisation and complexification. This pathway offers narratives that are richly descriptive whilst remaining faithful to the participant as well as an opportunity for greater insight into their meanings, which in turn enable us to see more clearly the essence of phenomena and to place them within the setting of other participants’ lives. This provides rich, novel and compelling themes and threads of lived experiences of



participants, from which we will uncover deeper meanings about those experiences and thus of how participants understand, are motivated to and by their contemporary modes of spirituality.

At the very core of our work are individuals and the overriding priority is that this methodology must be applied whilst ensuring the protection of those participating. Central to any project involving Human Science is the need for proper safeguards. This falls within the area of Ethics, however Ethics are a practical matter which will be dealt with in the Methods chapter.

## **Conclusions**

We have considered at length the theoretical elements of our project to assess hermeneutic phenomenology as a methodology for the study of spiritual experience. In this chapter we have noted the integration of the theoretical, epistemological and methodological foundations which can work together in an approach that seeks to better understand the meaning for the individual of spirituality through their spiritual experiences by placing the individual at the centre of the research and attributing to each participant credibility and veracity. The outcome is a methodology that functions through a descriptive interpretative process, rather than explanatory objective, and produces descriptions together with themes and threads of key elements. However we need to consider the practical ways in which this

framework for hermeneutic phenomenology can be applied, to ascertain if it could work in practice and this is done in the next chapter on Methods.



## Chapter 10

### Methods

#### Introduction

Having assessed theoretical, epistemological and methodological foundations for a hermeneutic phenomenological approach for the study of spiritual experience, we have determined the validity of this approach as one capable of describing and interpreting spiritual experiences from delicate narratives in which issues about context are not always obvious and therefore a process of contextualising through contextualisation and complexification is necessary, in conjunction with the hermeneutic circle, in the reductive aspect of the methodology, which extends to include the researcher's involvement, which is addressed through reflexivity.

Whereas methodology addresses theoretical underpinnings for properly conducted research with valid outcomes, *methods* considers the practical approach for the selection, ingathering and subsequent consideration of data, which includes determining how the ethical principles of a methodology are actually employed in practice. In this work all ethical aspects are considered in this chapter, including the recruitment and interviewing of participants and the detailed, practical handling of narratives arising from interviews. The methods employed

must be co-ordinated with the theoretical, epistemological and methodological parts of a framework under which hermeneutic phenomenology may be applied to the study of spiritual experience.

### **Objectives**

Our work is an exploration of spiritual experience founded on notions of ideographic knowledge, relativity in truth, with an epistemological locus in phenomenology and a methodological preference for hermeneutic phenomenology. The type of knowledge sought invites a qualitative approach with less emphasis on representation, sample size and statistical analysis and a greater emphasis on individuals offering a descriptive and interpretative path, rather than an explanatory outcome, placing the participant at the centre of the research and giving the credence, acceptance and validity to their contribution which a phenomenological framework can provide. The result of such research are descriptions with which others may resonate and by drawing out essential features, themes and threads, we may gain a deeper appreciation of the subject under study from a perspective of the discipline of Spirituality.

To begin we need to consider the researcher and reflexivity.

### **Researcher's Position and Reflexivity**

The researcher needs to consider both their own position and how that position leads to understandings that may interact with the study, which includes considering their views and the extent of their knowledge about the subject as well as their own background, in order that their interpretation can be understood having regard to the researcher's context as well as the participant. A potential benefit of the researcher being an outsider is that they do not bring particular views or prejudices about theories or practices within a tradition, a particular stance in contemporary political, theological or social issues, or have any particular position or persuasion with which they were more aligned. The researcher needs to be sympathetic to notions of spirituality and the seeking of a greater understanding of what the term and practices associated therewith mean to participants.

This approach towards description and interpretation of meanings and actions accords well with a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology that also requires reflexivity on the part of the researcher, placing to one side questions of veracity or acceptability from the descriptions acquired during fieldwork and may offer greater neutrality as the researcher would be neither immersed within the tradition nor hold any conscious opposition thereto.

## Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues in research pertain to the professional conduct of researchers (Cresswell 2003, 62) and are focussed on the consequences of research on the participants (Denscombe 2007, 5). Gillham notes that, whilst scientific research, investigating the material world is able to manipulate the subject under study through the holding constant of some factors whilst varying others, such manipulation in dealings with people is much more restricted and subject to ethical considerations (Gillham 2000, 3).

The British Sociological Association notes that whilst research makes a valuable contribution to society researchers have a responsibility to ensure the safety and well-being of all involved in the project and enter into moral relationships with participants (BSA 2002, 2)<sup>67</sup>. This is echoed by the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth<sup>68</sup>. The Economic and Social Research Council make similar provisions for the protection of participants through its Research Ethics<sup>69</sup> and the University of St Andrews Guidelines for Ethical Research Practice state, “Researchers have a responsibility to

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<sup>67</sup> British Sociological Association. 2002. Statement of ethical practice for the British Sociological Association. [www.britisoc.co.uk/media/27107/StatementofEthicalPractice.pdf](http://www.britisoc.co.uk/media/27107/StatementofEthicalPractice.pdf). Last modified May 2004.

<sup>68</sup> Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth. 2009. Ethical Guidelines for good research practice. [www.theasa.org/downloads/ASAethicsguidelines2011.pdf](http://www.theasa.org/downloads/ASAethicsguidelines2011.pdf). Last modified 26<sup>th</sup> November 2011.

<sup>69</sup> Economic & Social Research Council. 2010. Framework for Research Ethics. [www.esrc.ac.uk/images/Framework\\_for\\_Research\\_Ethics\\_tcm8-4586.pdf](http://www.esrc.ac.uk/images/Framework_for_Research_Ethics_tcm8-4586.pdf)

safeguard the interests of those involved in or affected by their work and to report their findings accurately and truthfully.”<sup>70</sup> In addition there rests upon the researcher a responsibility to ensure the physical, social and psychological wellbeing of participants and that their rights, interests and privacy should not be prejudiced and need to be safeguarded due to the likely disparity of power between researcher and participant (BSA 2002, 2-3). The University of St Andrews and the School of Divinity provide guidance and procedures for obtaining consent prior to proceeding with such Human Science research<sup>71</sup>. Other organisations, institutions and professional bodies have equivalent safeguards offering guidance in this regard. In projects studying issues of spirituality safeguards need to be extended to protect the spiritual wellbeing of participants. The case study within this work required ethical approval from the University of St Andrews.

For this to be achieved a system is required that is simply designed, easily understood and readily adhered to, with the capacity to engage with prospective participants, enabling them to make informed choices as to whether or not to participate and consider their qualifications to be an eligible participant. This operates as a further safeguard, clarifying the nature of the population in a study and highlighting any special measures that may need to be adopted, such

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<sup>70</sup> University of St Andrews. 2011. Guidelines for Ethical Research Practice. [www.st-andrews.ac.uk/media/UTREC\\_Guidelines\\_Sep2011.pdf](http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/media/UTREC_Guidelines_Sep2011.pdf). Last modified 11<sup>th</sup> September 2011.

<sup>71</sup> For the School of Divinity see [www.st-andrews.ac.uk/utrec/SEC](http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/utrec/SEC)



as in approaching children or vulnerable adults. In the case study added complexity such as dealing with a vulnerable population or persons was not relevant.

To achieve these objectives informed consent, freely given with the option to withdraw or refuse to participate with no reason given should be obtained (BSA 2002, 3; ESRC 2010, 28-31; UTREC 2011, 9-11) and recorded in writing by the provision of an initial information sheet and subsequently a consent form completed by each participant prior to the commencement of any participation. An ethical system ought to comprise an information sheet, in for example the style based on the case study contained in the appendix, which should be passed to any party expressing an interest in participating in the study. The information sheet ought to be left with a prospective participant until either they confirm having read it and wish to proceed or for a few weeks, after which contact should be re-established to ascertain if they wished more time to consider, have any further questions or wish/do not wish to participate. Those who wish to participate should then be provided with a consent form which, once completed, needs to be in the researcher's possession prior to an interview commencing and must reiterate the terms of the information sheet, specifying that to which consent is being given and confirming that they could decide without giving any reason to withdraw from participation at any time or to withdraw their contribution. It should also inform participants of the

terms under which any data would be handled, analysed, stored, retained and disseminated, including that data collected would be anonymised, so that no one could be identified, and would be destroyed after a finite time period, such as three or five years from completion of the final report, and how outcomes would be disseminated by publication, poster presentation, dissertation submission and other means. Consent is essential to proceeding. A copy of a style consent form used in the case study is contained in the appendix.

The level of risk to the interviewer needs to be assessed, although in the case study the topic relates to specific groups dealing with personal experience of spiritual life and does not anticipate any specific trauma in life having occurred or being raised. But nevertheless it should be considered possible that participants could become distressed during the interview. Whilst such risks need to be assessed on a project-by-project basis, in the case study it was considered sufficient that a contact name be provided who could be contacted in the event of such a situation arising.

The purpose of the interview is to gain meaningful data from the participant and it is better achieved by ensuring that the participant feels comfortable discussing the issues. An important aspect is the setting in which the interview takes place, although the protection of the interviewer must also be considered and suitable safeguards adopted.

In the case study it was sufficient that another person was informed of the whereabouts and expected times of the interview, with phone calls immediately prior to and after the interview confirming its completion sufficient to ensure the researcher's safety and thereby balancing the safety of the researcher with the undertaking of confidentiality to the participant. This complies with the ethical considerations in the methodological framework which demanded provisions for the safety of both participant and researcher.

As part of the protection of the individual, the means of data collection, recording and retention, including the recording of transcripts of interviews, requires to be sufficiently robust and measured so as to ensure the confidentiality of both participants and their contribution, whilst allowing use of the material and its appropriate dissemination as outcomes of the research. The methods for data holding and analysis as well as any possible methods of dissemination following the conclusion of the project and the protection of the participants anonymity needs to be explained in the consent form in order that each participant understands fully what participation would and would not involve in compliance with ethical frameworks (BSA 2002, 3, UTREC 2011, 10). The handling of data about participants ought to be retained in a database of participants on the researcher's desk computer, not laptop or other mobile device, with a backup to a mass storage device which would be retained in a secure location. Details of each

participant should be inputted into a master database prior to the interview, with a unique identification reference assigned thereto, which would subsequently be the sole reference for that person or interview, if a person provided more than one interview. Additional information about an interview should be logged into a separate database referring only to this unique reference number and holding details of the interview. Following entry into the master database subsequent documents should be referred to solely by their unique reference number. Non-electronic documents forming part of the research, such as the researcher's research notes, papers provided by participants and other documentation should be referenced with the unique reference number and retained in a secure location other than when being used.

The sound files should be downloaded to the desk computer, to which others do not have access and backed up to the mass storage device. The sound files can then either be self-transcribed or sent securely, such as by recorded delivery mail or a secure electronic delivery method, to a trusted transcriber, who would email the largely anonymised transcripts to the researcher, which would then be saved to the researcher's desk computer and backed up to the mass storage device. The researcher needs to ensure the anonymity of the participants in the final transcripts, the "working transcripts" which would be used during the preparation of narratives. This phase would

be conducted by one copy of each working transcript being printed and placed securely in an arch-lever file. Where analysis required secondary Word documents these would, where practicable, be retained in the same arch-lever folder beside the relevant transcript. In any event all such documents ought to be retained on the researcher's desktop computer or workspace to minimise any risk of data, whether original sound files, transcripts, and secondary notings or of another nature being misplaced, read or appropriated by a third party or lost. This is an important issue as it relates to compliance with the ethical consent on which the project proceeds.

### **Recruitment of Participants**

Qualitative research does not require a representative sample, although a variety of backgrounds is helpful as it adds variety to a study. Critical is selecting those who are able to provide a narrative about their spiritual life. Institutional centres, such as churches, mosques, synagogues, temples, spiritual centres, etc. may be helpful as a locus for those with an inherent interest in this area and, whilst some prospective participants may be known to the researcher, it is preferable if participants are not closely connected to the researcher, as this may interfere with the interview process. Identifying suitable participants involves processes such as contact points or referral systems, which have several advantages including ensuring that the

prospective participants are active and known to established members of the relevant tradition(s). As such there is implied verification of their qualification and for the prospective participant there is some reassurance that research is bona fide and being conducted with the approval of that tradition. Whilst there are potential disadvantages in such a referral system, such as the possibility that only certain “trusted” persons would be promoted as projects are not quantitative, this becomes less critical and needs to be balanced with reaching those who do ‘represent’ a tradition. After an initial approach about an interest in the research an information sheet would be provided and the prospective participant would then respond to the researcher, directly for confidentiality, confirming their willingness to become involved. In response to this the researcher would forward a consent form and upon its return make arrangements for the interview to take place. This method for the recruitment of participants ensures compliance with the criteria for eligibility to participate.

### **Interview Process**

Interview is a useful principal method for the collection of data, where the information being sought is about the meanings and understandings people attach to their lived world experiences (Kvale1996, 105). Participants speak much more easily and eloquently, and with less reserve, compared to writing (Van Manen 1997, 64). The

participant's selection of location both provides them with a sense of control and empowerment, a location more comfortable for them and thus where they would be more likely to be open to discussion and disclosure. The interview ought to last as long as the participant wishes to talk, but typically may be expected to last around one hour and ought to follow a consistent theme, comprising a series of open questions which act as topic guides, introducing the topic and allowing the participant to speak freely with further questions and conversation developing where feasible or appropriate, thus creating a semi-structured but open interview process.

A phenomenological approach to interviewing invites the participant to be a teacher, explaining to the researcher and helping them to understand the meaning of the participant's experiences (Spradley 1979, 34). To aid this relationship it is helpful at the outset of a meeting to share some general information and experiences in order to develop a relationship with the participant, without influencing possible subsequent discussions, and this would typically comprise an introduction to the researcher, background to the project (largely reiterating that on the information sheet), likely modes of use and dissemination of the work after completion of the project, clarification of the use of digital equipment, such as dictaphone, and confirmation that the participant was still agreeable to proceeding. This is a difficult

balance in conducting interviews, which lies somewhere between the questionnaire and the therapeutic interview (Kvale 1996, 125).

The questions need to be prepared in advance and submitted as part of the ethical approval process which in respect of our case study are contained in the appendix. The determination of the questions at this stage facilitates a means of determining what information is sought, the order and structure of questions, providing a thematic approach during the process of each interview as it is easy to become distracted in conversation and to omit key issues. Van Manen proposes that the purpose of the interview is two-fold: (1) to explore and gather experiential data through the use of open-ended interview methods, which retain sufficient structure so as to remain focussed on the point of research and (2) as a vehicle by which a relationship with the participant can be developed. To probe further the meaning of experiences, the collection of stories, anecdotes and incidents is a helpful approach (Van Manen 1997, 67). However it must also be placed in an overall process that gathers sufficient information about the participant and their understandings that the lived experiences and the meaning ascribed thereto are understood within the relevant context. This approach can be reduced to more practical questions such as Crotty's suggested questions, "What was it like [for you]?" and "What does it mean to you?", which he views as the central questions in a phenomenological study (Crotty 1996, 21), reiterating Van Manen's



call to remain “close to the experience as lived” (Van Manen 1997, 67). Thus the interview ought to be structured around the core questions or topic areas, but within each the participant should be encouraged to talk as freely and widely as they wish.

Where possible it is preferable if the questions are not passed to the participant in advance, in order to facilitate as spontaneous a response as possible, more likely to offer insights into lived world experiences (Kvale 1996, 129). However in some circumstances participation may be conditional upon having prior notice of the questions, or of giving written answers to the questions rather than by interview. Whilst this is anticipated to reduce the spontaneity and increase reserve, nevertheless it is a means of obtaining an interview which may not otherwise take place and the value of the narrative then needs to be assessed to determine if it is suitable for inclusion in the study. No payment or other form of remuneration should be offered in respect of participating in an interview, other than providing a brief synopsis to all participants of the outcomes of the project, as this may influence the details of the narrative or reasons for participating.

### **Other Data Gathering Methods**

In addition to interviewing participants it may be that others within the tradition may hold useful information that would illuminate issues raised in the narratives and so interviewing them may also be

helpful. However note-taking of the time, place and other information or impressions and of feelings the interviewer has at the time of the interview may assist in the understanding of the narratives and in the reflexive and contextualising processes. Thus the maintenance of field-notes which contain further information can be useful to such a study. In some instances participants may offer documents or other writings which provide helpful additional sources.

Most weight must necessarily be placed on the individual, however these additional perspectives may assist to place the individual interviews in a context and be useful in the processes of contextualisation and complexification.

### **Description and Interpretation Methods**

The interview process recorded discussions which, through transcription, are reduced to written narratives, which within Microsoft Word or similar software documents are capable of analysis as texts. The hermeneutic phenomenological approach seeks to draw from these texts themes and threads that arise in individual narratives but also those that may run through a number of narratives and are capable of providing a richer, deeper understanding of spiritual experience. When it is not possible for all transcripts to be considered a selection should be chosen for deeper analysis, based on both the textual nature of the narrative and those offering a breadth of

experiences. The working transcripts are not selected to be representative but also to provide a richer dimension to the descriptions.

In adhering to the methodological approach the working transcripts are read through on at least three occasions so that the researcher can gain a deep appreciation of the contents, after which those themes that appear on a number of occasions or that are otherwise more prominent are considered further. Van Manen states that the function of phenomenology is to provide an opportunity to gain a greater insight into the meaning of everyday experiences without taxonomising, rather by describing and interpreting the narratives to offer a deeper understanding of the experiences in order that helpful insights may be revealed (Van Manen 1997, 9, 11). Therefore we do not seek to dissect and critique the texts, but to explore them drawing out the richness of experience, always being mindful of Neilson's conclusions in Spencer's 2006 work which notes the fragility of this type of data:

“Research like this can destroy what it touches.....reduce the joy-filled and traumatic stories of life and death to a set of arid principles.”

(Spencer 2005, 86).

Hermeneutic phenomenology treats texts with care and sensitivity whilst exploring important themes and threads, and achieves this by the researcher reading the transcripts rather than employing software, such as NVivo, to draw out key word and phrases. Van Manen has also commented on the limitations of software in projects of this nature, as a phenomenological approach requires an insightful consideration of the narratives, finding, discovering or describing phenomena through personally 'seeing' or becoming imbued with the narratives (Van Manen 1997, 78-79). A further reason for not following a strict coding practice on these themes and threads is because often similar meanings seemed to be intended, similar experiences narrated, but in very different ways, so that a string of words are unlikely to identify these threads. The application of human empathy is critical and it is only by being immersed in the accounts that a deep, rich description can be won.

The practical outworking of this approach is a manual method involving the writing and rewriting of texts, the outcome of which is to provide themes and threads for each working transcript. The detail of this is important because it describes how reduction and interpretation actually takes place in the application of hermeneutic phenomenology. This process leads to the development of narratives of the participant's experiences, with themes and threads drawn out and re-applied to the original narrative in order that new, deeper understandings could be

attained. Van Manen notes that "...hermeneutic phenomenology is fundamentally a writing activity" (Van Manen 1997, 7). A further analysis amongst narratives is undertaken by drawing out themes and threads which appear significant or resonate between or amongst a number of participants and such 'universalities' are drawn together. In describing these as 'universal' rather than 'common' we do not mean that the same features necessarily appear but that there is resonance, familiarity or sameness about them. These notings are then considered both individually and together, facilitating an interpretation of not only what was actually being said and meant but also that which could be understood and taken from the participant's description, leading to a distillation of extracts into a richer description of these emerging themes and threads, which is the practical application of the Hermeneutic Circle. Arising themes and threads can then be applied to the individual narratives to ensure fidelity and a correct interpretation. By reflecting on threads and themes, and their interplay, a revelation of deeper understandings of the construction and location of a particular theme or thread within the narrative may become apparent, though it is necessary to somehow 'fix' experience so that it can be subjected to reflective consideration (Van Manen 1997, 86).

The purpose of phenomenological reduction is not to produce some form of mysterious description but a good description, revealing the structures of a lived experience such that the nature and

significance of the experience is viewed in a novel and compelling form (Van Manen 1997, 39). By taking themes and threads and viewing them through a lens, whereby they are viewed in isolation from the whole narrative and then viewed re-integrated into the narrative, their significance may become more apparent.

### **Application of Theories**

We have noted that the hermeneutic phenomenological approach is a descriptive interpretative approach which places the participant at the centre of the enterprise, accepting their account as credible and as truth. A question arises about the application of explanatory theories to the methodology, which theories, as we have seen, are outwith the scope of hermeneutic phenomenology itself. The case study offers an opportunity to consider this by reference to Gift theory and the concept of Reciprocity.

Ordinarily a hermeneutic phenomenology project would be completed by the finalisation of descriptive narratives and the identification of themes and threads and it would be contrary to this approach to use it as an explanatory model, however Blum notes that the interpretative and explanatory routes are not mutually exclusive (Blum 2012, 1044) and indeed phenomenology may act as a guide to social scientific approaches that seek explanations, by disclosing meanings upon which explanatory models can be constructed (Blum

2012, 1030). By extension it may be possible to apply a model, such as in the case study Gift theory, to a hermeneutic phenomenological study. However the obvious difficulty is the contamination of an interpretative undertaking by an explanatory intention, both of which are quite different, and would lead to a non-phenomenological and possibly erroneous outcome.

However the application of the explanatory model to the narratives, and especially the themes and threads, does offer an interesting mixed route, whereby meaning is firstly obtained, with an explanatory model subsequently applied. In the case study we observed how reciprocity was apparent in devotional practices and readily recognisable, however in relation to individual spiritual practices there emerged a more voluntary intention rather than obligatory sense of making a return to God. In this way the case study does illustrate the potential power of a combination of a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, providing a basis for a subsequent explanatory investigation. Such an explanatory element, however, is not essential to the application of hermeneutic phenomenology to the study of spiritual experience.

### **Conclusions**

In this chapter we have sought to identify the theoretical considerations of the framework, epistemology and the strategic level

methodology as well as the practical workings such as constitute method in the study of spiritual experience. We have considered practical issues such as recruitment, conducting and recording interviews and enquiring on the results, all within the context of an ethically acceptable construct. The ethical considerations have illustrated how there is a need to balance the research programme with the rights of participants. The process of description and enquiry has also been considered at length, considering the benefits and potential problems and offering a practical step-by-step approach, capable of moving from useful collected interviews to meaningful narratives and new insights into spirituality.

This chapter has assessed how the practical workings based on the theoretical concepts may operate in such a manner that would allow hermeneutic phenomenology to be applied to the study of spiritual experience and produce significant outcomes which would be interpretative rather than explanatory in nature. Having considered the various elements of Crotty's model we now turn to a discussion of the research question and draw conclusions for this project.





## **Chapter 11**

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this work was to assess the applicability and usefulness of hermeneutic phenomenology in the study of spiritual experience from the emergent discipline of Spirituality. We began by observing that spirituality was of increasing importance in various arenas within society, that such experience was an important topic to consider from a contemporary social and academic perspective, as well as the relevance and appropriateness of its academic study. We recognised the opportunity for a methodology that could offer insight into spiritual experiences as experiences, rather than from an 'applied spirituality' perspective weighed by other priorities, such as the priority of informing practice in nursing, and noted that hermeneutic phenomenology has been applied in a number of divergent disciplines in the study of experience. In this work we therefore undertook to assess the applicability of hermeneutic phenomenology to the study of spiritual experience. A case study was utilised to carry out a limited study, which could then be reflected upon whilst assessing various theoretical components that are involved in understanding experience and which would underpin this approach. The case study enabled an assessment of whether hermeneutic phenomenology could be a valid

approach to studying spiritual experience and provide outcomes which were in some way significant, though not ethereal or mystical, occurrences that elude description but rather are interpretations that bring out something new from the subject of enquiry. A successful methodology thus not only provides insights but also needs to provide descriptive narrative with which others may resonate, identify or associate. Therefore the criteria for assessing hermeneutic phenomenology as a valid methodology for the study of spirituality from the perspective of spiritual experience and within the discipline of spirituality will be one in which the theoretical components work together to enable outcomes that provide both rich narrative descriptions and fresh interpretative insights.

### **Spiritual Experience, Literature and the Case Study**

In defining its parameters, spirituality was practically focussed and experience was a significant element. Spirituality was associated with movements towards life-integration, transformation, awareness of transcendence and resilience against change, frequently but not exclusively defined by reference to the sacred. However sacred may also be understood to incorporate notions of authenticity, community, purpose, sustenance and freedom. We differentiated spirituality from terms such as mysticism and religion, noting spirituality was applied in

a number of contemporary areas such as healthcare, education, social services and business as well as religions.

The case study was located within a Christian context because of practical ease, although the methodology needs to be applicable to a wide range of spiritualities, and highlighted a number of important factors including authenticity, belonging, community, freedom and ritual, allowing us to observe many of the descriptions and elements of contemporary spirituality within the case study. These elements also appear within the literature for our definition. For example, many defined spirituality in terms of authenticity, (e.g. Schneider and Perrin). Ideas of belonging and community were also found in workplace spirituality. Tacey's description of spirituality as sensitive, transformative and having respect for mystery is sympathetic to the notion of freedom more explicitly stated by Lesniak as a means of countering the "disparate elements" of existence, all of which were identified in the case study. We can deduce from this that our definition of spirituality is well founded and applicable in a wide variety of circumstances, so that the applicability of hermeneutic phenomenology to the case study would be indicative of it being widely applicable in the study of spiritual experience and not reserved only to Christianity.

The purpose of this work was not the case study, which is a tool for that purpose, being the assessment of the methodology. We proceed by discussing the applicability of hermeneutic phenomenology

in various theoretical components and thereafter consider strengths and weaknesses of this approach.

### **Theoretical and Epistemological Framework**

Hermeneutic phenomenology lies within the phenomenology tradition founded by Edmund Husserl and developed by others included Martin Heidegger. Spirituality sits neither within a materialist nor an idealist paradigm, because the notion of a transcendent or sacred Other cannot be contained within the concept of the mind or an exclusively physical reality, but rather holds as possible the external existence of *an other* that may not always or ever fully be grasped and so cannot be limited to human reason, because this would be to restrict the potential of the spiritual dimension to human reason. Nor could it be considered as being physical. Existentialism, long associated and sympathetic to a phenomenological approach, functions as a locus within which the necessary constituents of a theoretical framework including perception, consciousness, intentionality, truth and identity can be held, whilst accepting the uniqueness of spirituality and thus it being highly personal for each individual.

The practical outworking as illustrated in the case study is the theoretical possibility of the acceptance by participants that, for them, there was an external entity, God, who was neither reducible to measurement nor whose existence was dependent upon their

reasoning or mind. Indeed most participants alluded to God as being greater than their understanding. The framework also considered constituent elements and how they may operate in creating meaning, whilst epistemologically we considered how experiences are first perceived and how, through intentionality, consciousness of the experience is then located within the individual's memory providing context, but then how that context could lead to meaning for the individual. In particular we noted that an interpretative rather than explanatory was helpful. We now discuss these foundations in more detail and how they relate to hermeneutic phenomenology and its application to the study of spirituality.

The framework acknowledges the development process of experience from perception to the laying of memory, involving intentionality of the object and the progression to being conscious of it, which is the contextualisation of the object for the individual. Within the study of spiritual experience this object must be considered 'real' as otherwise it is a denial of the individual's experience external and only partially revealed, because for spiritual matters it cannot be assumed that all such objects are always and fully revealed in an objective manner as otherwise this would be a denial of the potential fullness of spiritual experience *per se*. Christians, Jews and Muslims accept the existence of God; Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Pagans, New Age practitioners and others share in common a belief in the existence and

the possibility of a relationship with an external spiritual Other to which they wish to communicate and draw closer, which other is a separate entity from themselves, including some form of 'inner self'. Even in the application of spirituality to more novel settings such as the workplace or nursing and social work we can observe the possibility of something other which is experienced. Therefore an approach that permits the acceptance of an external object as real for the individual without judgement is critical, and perception becomes highly significant as the starting place of experience. Existentialism gives individuals the opportunity to find meaning for themselves and calls for authenticity, a strong foundational constituent.

Perception is that place where an external noumenon meets the mind, beginning the process of presentation mediated within the mind to consciousness in a representative process, including psychological mediation. This aspect of our theoretical framework offers an explanation for the experiential process of spirituality, which originates externally, and how such processes are mediated by acknowledging that the consciousness of an object is a subjective representation of the original object after its subjection to this process and an analysis of that consciousness could helpfully be interpretative. There is a critical need to accept an individual's description of such an experience as credible and valid, but objective analysis of the subject matter to which this methodology could be applied is very difficult. Phenomenology offers a

solution through the bracketing of such issues, facilitating the individual being placed at the centre of the enquiry. As Blum noted, it is helpful to firstly describe religious experiences, whilst this does not exclude other approaches, as a means of gaining insight into the experience for the individual and such a process could be interpretative, for which phenomenology based on Heidegger would be helpful.

Consciousness is concerned with the meaning and knowledge of an object, having been brought to an individual's attention through the process of intentionality. Gennaro differentiated between awareness and consciousness, the latter being a fuller process leading to knowledge unlike awareness, citing the example of a day-dreaming lorry driver, and Loftus' suggested that only a minor portion of perceivable events are actually perceived. These concepts fit well in our framework for two reasons: firstly, they permit the acceptance of the existence of that beyond which is perceived, a proposed characteristic of spirituality, and, secondly, the uniqueness of personal nature of spiritual experience can be accommodated in process. Merleau-Ponty reminded us that each person will understand and thus derive knowledge of an object in different ways, albeit in some very similar instances, and therefore different understandings of an object can arise. Foster notes perception is the observation of a particular part of an entity (e.g. part of the skin of an apple) which is subsequently contextualised through memory and Peasall speaks of it as conception:



the attribution of sensory information to an external object. Thus intentionality, in spirituality, necessarily involves the interaction of interpretative tools, such as expectation, memory and identity.

Expectation can be used to refer to both retention (recall) and protention (anticipation), the processes where the mind either looks back to previous knowledge to form meaning, or looks forward and, based on current knowledge, anticipates what may be forthcoming. These operate during the experience in anticipating phenomena, highlighting how in the intentional process an appearance is located within memory, and is understood in terms already held in memory, rather than that appearance being held as fundamental and memory located around it as best as possible to offer meaning. The consequence is that personal conception takes priority over the objective appearances, reinforcing the subjectivity of experience and demonstrating how memory influences thoughts, understandings and actions. This accords well with our understanding of spirituality by offering a valid explanation of the nature of participants' narratives and why similar experiences, such as the Mass, can be interpreted differently. We observed many different descriptions of the Mass amongst the participants although the actual Ritual is consistent, so this aspect of the theoretical framework is supported by the case study. Within this interpretative process, identity is important because it influences self-conception, one's understanding of oneself, which in

turn influences an individual's understanding of everything else. For example Participant 5 described her identity in terms of family lineage to Ireland and Participant 24 associated himself clearly with the Roman Catholic community.

We observed at the outset that there is a profundity within spirituality which speaks to and of the very core of a person and their being, and through considering theoretical issues we have gained greater clarity as to how important and influential the interaction is between memory and experience in generating meaning and knowledge for each individual.

The framework supports a means of understanding spiritual experience as a deeply personal record of objects and occurrences that may vary with time. A person's interpretation of such objects and occurrences also vary with time, so it is important to appreciate the role of interpretation as it affects the capacity of the methodology in terms of doing and yielding. Whilst this supports our need for a subjective rather than objective framework, it raises difficulties in the conception of truth which are held by acceptance of ideographic knowledge which finds meaning in unique experiences, and is the principal type of knowledge in relation to experience. Thus the framework is aligned with the type of knowledge generated by the subject matter, thereby supporting the theoretical integrity of hermeneutic phenomenology for our purpose to this extent. However we need to consider not only knowledge but truth:

the narratives are statements of truth for the participants. Rorty's proposition of truth being compartmentalised and not necessarily reconcilable, verifiable or contiguous as a whole leading to some types of knowledge, such as ideographic, being variable, relative to function and dependent on a situation, accords with an interpretative framework, holding it as personal and incomplete, without need for reconciliation or repetitive constancy, because in spirituality there is an acceptance that complete knowledge and truth of the sacred may never be attained and is, at an individual level, unique. In the case study participants accepted this, speaking often of trust. For example Participant 9 stated, "I don't need to understand it." Participants did not attempt to logically correlate their experience or catalogue them, such as to be self-evidencing, but rather offered incomplete descriptions of a series of dislocated experiences that nevertheless resonated and remained consistent, offering insights into their life-world. The case study illustrated the practical outworkings, efficacy and validity of hermeneutic phenomenology in tackling issues of truth. The framework accommodates these necessary conditions of truth and knowledge, offering a place in which dislocation and incompleteness is acceptable and valid through incorporating sufficient flexibility to account for non-perceived influences that add to the meaning deriving process and thereby the theoretical foundations necessary for our purpose both

accord with hermeneutic phenomenology and form a valid basis from which to conduct research into spiritual experience.

It was also helpful to locate our theoretical foundation within an appropriate model, however many models require objectivity, possess explanatory power and have difficulty adequately addressing subjectivity. Existentialism offers a useful foundation because of its focus on the individual and relationships, allowing us to hold in tension personal experiences and notions of truth, leading to lives shaped by peoples own values and interpretations, offering a model located in meaning-giving and authenticity which co-operates with this conception of truth.

Epoché in phenomenology, the bracketing out of certain judgements, enables a study to proceed without needing to answer otherwise fundamental questions such as the existence of the transcendental Other. Without the epoché the study would either be part of the religious tradition (for example, the case study would be theological because disclosure could then only come from a position of faith), or it would be a cultural or social scientific study, which would deny the reality of the transcendental Other, on the basis of lack of evidence. The epoché functions to enable the analysis of the meanings of an individual or community in respect of the spiritual experiences, without affirming or denying the existence of the supernatural entities.

Additionally, phenomenology assists us by offering a means of differentiating between the object apprehended and the object as apprehended, with our acknowledging access only to the object as apprehended which is located in consciousness, thereby offering a means of interpreting the experience for its description and context. The reductive process in phenomenology is critical and, as we have observed, differs between Husserl and Heidegger. For Husserl the purpose was to move from the description of an object to the pre-reflexive phenomenon at the beginning of intentionality, whereas for Heidegger the reductive process was an interpretative process, moving from the object as described to an interpretative position in which meaning for the individual could be better understood. It is this latter use of reduction that has been utilised by hermeneutic phenomenology, and in seeking an interpretative approach enables new meanings to be disclosed or circumstances to be understood in new ways for the individual, without demanding explanations. As Blum has noted, there is a useful place for a descriptive and interpretative phenomenological approach rather than an explanatory function, which he ascribes to social scientific approaches. The reductive process we have considered provides the epistemological underpinning for an hermeneutic phenomenological approach to the study of spiritual experience.

Attempting to interpret conscious experience as a means to learning more about the phenomenon is epistemologically justifiable, viable and in accordance with our framework of understanding the nature of experience through a phenomenological epistemology. The interplay amongst individuals provides an explanation of how others are experienced and influence each other's experiences, which draws us to an awareness of such interpersonal influences and may be expanded to incorporate signing and significance. In addressing these issues, an interpretative approach in conjunction with phenomenology enables us to be able to move beyond the transcript and narrative and interpret what the outcomes tell us about the essence of spiritual experience, whilst protecting against bias using a Hermeneutic Circle incorporating contextualisation and complexification.

In the Introduction, we identified that spirituality was attractive to people and subsequently identified experience as an important element. To address the question '*What it is about spirituality?*' we need to understand better the experience and a means of doing this is by moving from description, the refined articulation of the experience, towards the meaning of the experience. We have discussed the nature of the theoretical and epistemological framework and found that they are compatible in a form that offers a valid and effective basis on which the application of hermeneutic phenomenology for the study of spiritual experience may be constructed. Now we turn to the methodology and

methods elements to assess hermeneutic phenomenology as a means to study spiritual experience.

### **Methodology and Methods**

After considering the nature of quantitative and qualitative approaches we determined our approach to be qualitative and the knowledge sought to be ideographic, which is the same as that in the theoretical and epistemological sections, thereby suggesting congruence and validity throughout the framework. Phenomenology was particularly well placed for the study of lived experiences, such as spirituality. After surveying a number of qualitative approaches, assessing them in the light of our objectives, the type of data we would gather and their applicability to our theoretical and epistemological section, we identified that our methodology needed to incorporate both a phenomenological and a hermeneutical approach which would favour interpretation over explanation, thereby treating the data more sensitively.

Hermeneutic phenomenology was developed initially by Heidegger to investigate phenomena and the meanings attached to those experiences by individuals. The application of the Hermeneutic Circle involved a process of asking questions to move from unthematized to thematized data and a more explicit rendering of the meaning ascribed by the individual to phenomena. Our approach of

describing the experience, like the North American School, and thereafter interpreting same, like the European School, provides both rich narratives and an opportunity to further explore the phenomenon. This two-stage approach satisfies a desire to offer an approach to the participants' contributions by two means: (1) as resonance and identification with narratives, and (2) a thematised consideration, because "understanding is always more than merely re-creating someone else's meaning" (Gadamer 2004, 368). Offering others the opportunity to engage with the narratives enables readers to discern meaning whilst the thematised, interpreted activity sought "to find meanings in beliefs, symbols and behaviours" (McCutcheon 1999, 5). Hufford's trenchant comment on this aspect of the objective world "that the knowers claim to know about it" (Hufford 1999, 24, 294-295) reiterates and thereby demonstrates uniformity within our approach. Phenomenology's process of bracketing issues of truth, such as the existence of God, avoided potential failure that would have beset other approaches, whilst the hermeneutic approach offered greater insights, such as in the case of Participant 24 identifying a sense of purpose within his understanding of spirituality. A constant concern was gaining further insight without conducting an explanatory approach, which would effectively damage, distort or destroy the meanings contained within the transcripts. A hermeneutic approach avoids this explanatory route and contextualisation and complexification assisted the



interpretative process, as has been demonstrated within the case study, by offering new openings into the transcripts in a non-reductive manner.

The application of hermeneutic phenomenology therefore concurs and works effectively in conjunction with the framework. However interpretation is of greater use where the situation under enquiry is better understood and there can be details elsewhere in the transcript as well as outwith that can assist. Information readily available and within transcripts provides a context and placing an element under enquiry into this context offers contextualisation, however, as we have observed, other information that may impact on the description may be outwith the transcript and is less easy to uncover, but can be incorporated through a process of complexification. Thus hermeneutic phenomenology provides a phenomenological approach with an interpretative stage and places aspects of transcripts within their appropriate situation. For example Participant 5 described an affiliation with Ireland, however by drawing in information about Irish migration and the struggle of migrants in Scotland we were able to observe more clearly both a reason and the implications for such affiliation. Without such a process our interpretation may have drawn alternative or less detailed conclusions. However, as can be noted by the size of Chapter 3, contextualisation is a large undertaking, drawing in as much information as possible

surrounding the project, which makes the methodology cumbersome and better for smaller scale studies.

Van Manen notes that the methodological objective is not a mysterious conception incapable of description or understanding, but the identification of key characteristics that set that object apart from other objects in the experience of the participant. In the case study we took one example from each participant to examine more closely. The objects selected were to test the methodology whilst acknowledging that due to the size of the case study these interpretations would be limited. Notwithstanding the restrictions, our case study demonstrated that we were able to draw meaning-laden descriptions of participants and identify something of that which made the experience uniquely spiritual for that individual. We were also able to identify themes amongst participants, allowing us to interpret new meanings in a wider setting which, by identifying these themes and threads, we were able to gain greater insight into the nature of spirituality for the participants.

Themes and threads organised elements into categories that are either characteristics (themes) or elements that facilitate those characteristics (threads) and is a standard form of classification within phenomenology, to assist us to see more clearly the interaction between the elements that produce the experience. The delicate nature of transcripts and the hermeneutic process being significantly subjective in nature increases the importance of giving adequate

consideration to the role and influence of the researcher. The function of the researcher is to present narratives as from the participants and reflexivity seeks to minimise the influence of the researcher's own prejudices, understandings and meanings and is a necessary factor in the methodology. Though the eradication of researcher subjectivity is not feasible however it is possible, whilst attempting to restrict resulting influences, to also tell something of the researcher in order that readers may be aware of the researcher's position and take account of this when reading the narratives. Additionally, through the use of the Hermeneutic Circle in conjunction with contextualisation and complexification, there is a constant questioning of interpretations and judging of same against the transcripts, which aids fidelity amongst transcripts, narratives and enquiry. In this way we both seek to limit the influence of the researcher and offer the reader an insight into the researcher's position, so that they may also make their judgements. The reader's understanding influences their reading of the narratives and interpretations, so the whole process is bound with an acknowledgement of the subjectivity of each interested party whilst offering the reader something new and insightful.

A number of ethical considerations were considered and incorporated which affect the application of hermeneutic phenomenology, a primary requirement being to ensure the anonymity of the participants, partly to encourage participation but also to ensure

that the identity of individuals does not usurp the objective of the study. However the practical consequences of maintaining anonymity are significant, such as the preparation of anonymised narratives because, as seen in the case study, although the potential population for participants was large the uniqueness of each participant raised the possibility of their being identifiable from the narratives or enquiries. An extensive process needs to be employed to remove identifying markers, however this also reduced the detail of the narrative. For example in the case study there are relatively few members of specific religious communities and thus reference to such communities could not be made without reasonable prospects of identifying the participant but participants' anonymity takes priority, as it is central to the ethical principles of the methodology. As a consequence in the case study the richness of the narratives was reduced because of the absence of information about the participant and limited information about their context, though such additional information can be validly utilised in the enquiry process, provided it does not jeopardise the anonymity of the participant. Accordingly the reduction in detail inevitably diminishes the richness of the narrative and the completeness of the description, but priority must always be given to the ethical protection of the individual over the outcomes of the research project. The case study demonstrates that within these limitations the methodology still achieves our objectives.

Recording conversations with participants which were subsequently transcribed was preferable to note-taking during the interview because it was easier, more accurate and facilitated more open sharing by participants, as is evidenced in the transcripts of the case study by their often speaking in quasi sentences with interlinking phrases and sounds, as had been anticipated. We can conclude that the methods worked well in the gathering of data and in conformity with the methodology. The open structure of questions provided a structure around which topics of significance could be raised, whilst allowing participants freedom to speak as they desired. No closed questioning was involved.

### **Methods: Practical Matters**

The case study identified certain practical aspects of conducting research of this nature. The use of the information sheet and consent sheet was a means of attracting interested and interesting participants, whilst also identifying any problems at an early stage. For example, by clearly stating what was required of participants and what the project was researching, a potential participant was able to withdraw at an early stage. Thus as well as being an ethical process it was also a useful practical step, and illustrated the operation of the ethics procedure in practice.

### **Hermeneutic Phenomenological Enquiry Phase**

The analysis of contributions by participants incorporating contextualisation and complexification is validly based on our theoretical principals. Tying narratives to transcripts through the use of quotations retains a closeness between the transcript and the narrative, whilst employing the Hermeneutic Circle as a means of enquiry on the transcripts. These operated together to reveal valid and significant insights into the subject under study, whilst simultaneously providing a checking system to ensure fidelity to the transcripts. The delicate nature of narratives is apparent in the case study and the means of preparing and studying same requires to be simultaneously gentle and inquisitive, so that unique, rich descriptions result, offering readers access thereto and could be separately capable of drawing out meanings of spiritual experience pertinent to the study. The work is however demanding and time-consuming, because of the need to become familiar with the transcripts, avoid researcher intrusion and bias in the narratives and then undertake a process of drawing out meanings. The nature of this lends such an approach to smaller scale studies as the ability to hold large numbers of detailed narratives together to consider poses practical problems. The vast amount of information necessary for contextualisation appears to be a limiting feature. However the case study, even in its limited form, does demonstrate the effectiveness of the methodology. Accordingly in

applying our theoretical foundations and methodology in the practical context of the case study, we have achieved our purpose of offering access to individual's knowledge and experience of spirituality and in so doing answered the research question by assessing hermeneutic phenomenology as a methodology for the study of spiritual experience.

## **Conclusions**

Our objective was to consider whether hermeneutic phenomenology could be an approach that would offer insight into spiritual experience from the emerging discipline of spirituality. Hermeneutic phenomenology lies within the phenomenology tradition, the function of which is to provide good descriptions, revealing structures of lived experiences in novel and compelling forms. Within the framework described this work does offer a means of gaining new insights into spiritual experiences through providing rich descriptive narratives and drawing out insightful themes and threads, by incorporating contextualisation and complexification within the hermeneutic circle. However it does not provide an exhaustive analysis, nor quantitative details of the topic under enquiry, nor does it provide an exhaustive description of nouema associated with spiritual experiences, but it can give unique insights into aspects and meanings attached to such experiences. The case study demonstrated the operation and interaction of an interpretative hermeneutic circle, however in doing so the methodology is involved and time-consuming, limiting the size of a study to which it could be applied in practice and the time scale involved in conducting same. The greater the contextualisation the greater meaning can be drawn, however a huge amount of information may be required to achieve this. Even in our



limited case study Chapter 3, which provides some contextualisation, is substantial.

Our objective demanded an investigation as to whether our intended application of hermeneutic phenomenology could be founded on a solid framework, to enable its application in the study of spirituality where it would need the characteristic of flexibility, and be non-reductive, non-verifying, qualitative and capable of placing aside issues that are unanswerable. We considered at length theoretical foundations and observed that an existential understanding offered a valid foundation, taking into account issues about perception, memory and identity. There are potential weaknesses to the extent of unknown and unverifiable subjective entities, however this is balanced with our having addressed the issues of generalisability and trustworthiness. The case study demonstrates practically how such issues (e.g. the existence of God) which cannot be verified are competently and legitimately handled in the epistemological section discussing the epoché in the construction of meaning: we are not concerned with for example the objectivity of God's existence but the experience of the individual who makes such an assertion.

We noted the primary role phenomenology plays in the study of religion, facilitating an acceptance of unverifiable beliefs through the process of epoché and reduction, however the Husserlian approach of reducing experience to phenomena does not appear feasible, whereas

an interpretative approach adopting a Heideggerian approach fits better within the framework and is founded on the established methodology of hermeneutic phenomenology. We observed the outcome to be an insightful analysis, which has protected the integrity of the narratives, the identity of the participants and complied with both a valid theoretical foundation and ethical requirements. However the ethical requirement for anonymity of participants results in a diminution of the detail that can be woven into narratives, thereby limiting the richness and effectiveness of the methodology.

Whilst there are a number of methodological approaches located within the social sciences also offering qualitative strategies, these other approaches seek an exploratory rather than interpretive approach which, whilst valid, do not deny the validity of hermeneutic phenomenology or reduce its appropriateness. Rather hermeneutic phenomenology differs because it is capable of providing an interpretative rather than explanatory access to the subject of an enquiry and is appropriate to the type of study envisaged herein, because it enables sensitive interpretation of narratives whilst also allowing deeper insight into the phenomena. The case study has been helpful in highlighting the strengths and limitations of the theoretical framework, with issues of validity having been addressed through reflexivity and openness, whilst generalisability is reached by inviting

readers to resonate and identify with the narratives and trustworthiness is gained through individual interaction with the narratives.

This work was located within the developing discipline of Spirituality as distinct from social science or theology, in which acceptance of certain unverifiable characteristics such as the reality of a transcendent Other would be difficult and non-acceptance of others, such as from a specific faith based position, thereby offering an alternative approach to the study of this important area. Spirituality has been observed to be of increasing importance both in academia and in society and so its study with appropriate methodologies is likewise important.

The methodology operates and produces valid outcomes whilst operating within accepted parameters. These outcomes are that which we sought, permitting us to affirm that we have answered our research question by having assessed the suitability of hermeneutic phenomenology as a methodology for the study of spirituality from the position of spiritual experience within the discipline of Spirituality. Additionally this thesis has advanced knowledge in the following respects:

1. It has considered hermeneutic phenomenology as a methodology for the study of spiritual experience within a theoretical construct.

2. It has demonstrated hermeneutic phenomenology is a valid approach for the study of spiritual experience within the discipline of spirituality as well as some limitations to its application.
3. It has highlighted the interpretative mode of hermeneutic phenomenology and the application of the epoché as key components in the applicability of the methodology.
4. It has considered this methodology as applied specifically within the field of spirituality.
5. It has incorporated within this methodology the processes of contextualisation and complexification, as a means to better understand the situation of an individual in which experience occurs, and
6. It has identified and described characteristics of contemporary spirituality within the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of St Andrews and Edinburgh, which has not previously been achieved.

This methodology is not an exhaustive or exclusive means of addressing the question from the Introduction: *What is it about spirituality that is attractive?* It is one of a number of approaches that, together, assist us in gaining greater understanding of the importance of spirituality, which is a vast field encompassing areas from theology

to architecture, nursing to business, science to art, all of which in some way impact upon how individuals understand and draw meaning to their lives. Understanding more about spiritual experience assists us in understanding the role of spirituality in individuals' lives and, by extension, our communities and the whole of society, and thus its meaning within other fundamental questions of the human condition. The research question asked if hermeneutic phenomenology was a methodology that could be used to study spiritual experience from the lens of the discipline of spirituality. I have demonstrated both theoretically and through the case study that, subject to limitations, it can. This thesis advances our ability to explore and learn about spiritual experiences and thus something further about spirituality.

### **Further Work**

There is much further work to be carried out. Applying the methodology to a larger scale project would be interesting, testing how large a study may be feasible. It would be interesting to apply the methodology to other spiritual experiences, both geographically and traditionally, to further test its thoroughness, for example studies of spiritual experience within reformed traditions, studies of spiritual experience within other religious traditions such as Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and contemporary spiritual practices such as the community at Whithorn, and amongst persons attending psychic fairs,

or within paganism and Green religion. It would also be interesting to use the methodology to explore spiritual experiences in different cultures, such as a comparative study between Scotland and Malta, representing two small nations within the EU with long Christian traditions, in many ways sharing similarities but in other cultural ways very different, or Scotland and Chile, or between the United States and Canada, exploring the impact of different cultural and geographical influences on spiritual experience. It would also be interesting to investigate the role of spiritual experiences in contemporary Scottish culture: in business, politics, schools and hospitals, prisons, workplaces, government, the judiciary and legal profession and social settings, especially as we approach a referendum on Scottish independence, exploring what is unique spiritually to being Scottish or living in Scotland. Of particular interest would be applying this approach in a novel setting such as exploring the understanding of spiritual experience within an addiction context, such as within the lived recovery experiences of members of Alcoholics Anonymous, where spirituality holds a vital function, which setting would require stringent application of the ethical provisions.



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## **APPENDIX**



**UNIVERSITY OF St. ANDREWS**  
**SCHOOL of DIVINITY**  
**St. Mary's College, South Street, St Andrews, Fife KY16 9JU**

*A Path to Knowledge about God: Contemporary Spirituality within the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of St. Andrews and Edinburgh.*

**Information about the research study**

**The study**

My name is Gordon Barclay and I am a postgraduate student from the School of Divinity at St. Andrews University. I am conducting a study into expressions of contemporary spirituality within the Archdiocese of St. Andrews and Edinburgh.

The object of the study is to explore how spirituality is understood and practised within the Archdiocese and provide a flavour of contemporary Christian spirituality within this geographic area. It is not a quantitative study, working for example on a number and percentage basis, but rather looking at individuals' experiences and for common features. The results of the project are therefore not representative but a rather provide a picture to which others may relate.

Spirituality is of increasing importance within society. Within academic and church circles, and beyond, it has become increasingly noticeable that the decline in church membership is not mirrored by a decline in interest in spiritual matters, but rather the reverse. The interest in spirituality within society appears to grow year upon year. This study seeks to understand spirituality, rather than other forms of religious expression or activity, within the Archdiocese.

**Research aims**

The project has a number of objectives:-

- To explore the understanding of spirituality of members of the Roman Catholic Church within the Archdiocese of St. Andrews and Edinburgh.
- To explore the spiritual practices of members within the Archdiocese.
- To examine the impetus and implications for individuals' in pursuing such spirituality.
- To provide a descriptive narrative of understanding and experience of spirituality as found within the Archdiocese.



## **Methods**

As the research is focussed on individuals' understandings, experiences and expressions of spirituality, the research will be largely guided by those who participate. The study therefore uses qualitative methods, being methods looking at what people say rather than a numerical analysis, to investigate the experiences and views and will operate in the following manner:-

- ❖ There will be inclusion criteria – not everyone will be able to participate – which will consist of
  - being a member of the Roman Catholic Church and/or involved in their local Roman Catholic parish or an established Roman Catholic community;
  - residing within or being a member of a congregation within the geographic bounds of the Archdiocese of St Andrews and Edinburgh;
  - being over the age of 18years;
  - capacity to consent and participate;
  - Being known to their local parish priest or another member of the clergy.
  - Having an interest in spiritual matters.
- ❖ All potential participants will be given adequate information, including this, to be able to make a decision as to whether or not they wish to participate and if so then a consent form to that effect will be signed. It may be that not all persons who are willing to participant will be invited so to do due to time restrictions or other limitations imposed on the project.
- ❖ Each participant will be invited to meet with the researcher on one occasion for an interview which it is anticipated will not last longer than one hour.
- ❖ Interviews will be recorded for accuracy and proceed using topic guides but flexible to be directed within such topics as the participant wishes. The recordings of the interviews will be transcribed and analysed using computer software. The audio recordings and the transcripts made from them will be destroyed three years after the project has been completed.
- ❖ All transcripts will be anonymised so that the participant cannot be identified from it or from any report arising from it. The project places a high level of importance on the confidentiality of each participant although where disclosure of criminal activity occurs then such matters may be referred to relevant authorities.
- ❖ In addition to my Ph.D. dissertation I hope to disseminate the outcomes through academic and church channels, including presentations, poster presentations and

publications. I will also produce a brief summary of the outcomes for all the participants.

Researcher: Gordon Barclay, postgraduate student.  
Supervisor: Professor Mario Aguilar, School of Divinity, St Mary's College, University of St Andrews, South Street, St Andrews Fife, KY16 9 JU

Reference Number:.....



UNIVERSITY OF St. ANDREWS  
SCHOOL of DIVINITY

St. Mary's College, South Street, St Andrews, Fife KY16 9JU

**A Path to Knowledge about God: Contemporary Spirituality within the  
Archdiocese of St. Andrews and Edinburgh**

**CONSENT FORM**

- I confirm I have read and understand the information sheet provided for the above study. I have had time to think about it and ask any questions.
- I understand that the research is looking at spirituality within the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of St. Andrews and Edinburgh and to gain a greater insight into the understanding and practices of members of the Roman Catholic Church within this area.
- I agree to participate in one interview at a mutually convenient time and place.
- I understand that the researcher, Gordon Barclay will record our meeting and destroy the recording three years after the research has finished.
- I agree that the researcher can use the results as part of a dissertation and for publication at presentations, posters or publications but that all data so used will be anonymised such that neither I nor any other participant will be identifiable.
- I understand I can withdraw my consent at any stage without giving a reason.
- I understand I will be able to decline to answer any question or to stop the interview at any time.

- I understand that the interview relates to spirituality and is not designed to be emotionally charged however should I become distressed for any reason then the interview will be terminated and if necessary the person below can be contacted.

I have read and understood the above and agree to participate in this study.

Signed: .....

Date: .....

NAME: .....

ADDRESS: .....

TOWN: .....

should be:-

Name:..... Phone No.: .....

Address:.....

Relationship to me: .....

Telephone number: .....

Member of Parish:.....

Town of Parish:

.....

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**A Path to Knowledge about God: Contemporary Spirituality within  
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The following are the types of questions that will be asked of participants; which questions are designed to be as open as possible and essentially serving to introduce a topic.

1. Describe your faith and relationship with your church – both historically and as at present.
2. Describe your religious beliefs.
3. What do religion, theology, faith and spirituality mean to you and how do you differentiate between them.
4. How do you express and practise your faith and how influential is it in daily life – with examples if possible.
5. What do you understand by the term spirituality, is it important to you and if so in what ways – including any spiritual experiences you may have had.
6. What do you consider to be key characteristics of spirituality for you.
7. What helps you in your spiritual life and how / in what ways do these help
8. Do you think the spiritual life is static or progressive – what are its main characteristics for you.
9. Describe your experiences in your spiritual life, or experiences of life which have had a spiritual dimension for you.
10. Are there any particular modes of spirituality you regularly practise – what are these and how were you drawn to them.
11. Do you have a plan or vision of where your spiritual life is heading – describe it. What are the defining markers on your journey; at the

destination; are there any restrictions in terms of what spirituality you can practise.

12. Does, and if so how, does spirituality relate to modern society.